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Sarah Piatt and the Politics of Mourning

By

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements and Declaration.....	i
Summary.....	ii
A Note on the Text.....	iii
Epigraph.....	iv
Introduction: Sarah Piatt and Genteel Poetics.....	1
1.1. Biography and Publishing History.....	3
1.2. Shapes of a Soul: Piatt and the Genteel Aesthetic.....	14
1.3. Piatt's Hauntology and the Politics of Mourning.....	34
Chapter One: 'Being Only Out of Sight': Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and the Problem of Mourning in Postbellum America.....	50
2.1. 'A Material Miasma': Grief and the Failure of Consolation.....	50
2.2. 'Bought with a Price': The Economy of Divine Love.....	78
2.3. 'Think of God and Heaven': Consolation and Disciplinary Intimacy.....	86
2.4. 'Salvation, Communion, Reconciliation': Transforming the Social Context of Death.....	99
Chapter Two: Mourning and Memorialisation in Piatt's War Poetry.....	108
3.1. 'The Grave-yard Sun': Melancholic Remembrance and the Southern Cause.....	108
3.2. Suturing the Nation: Whitman and Stowe's Poetry of Redemption.....	135
3.3. 'I Want the Old War Back Again': Piatt and the Poetics of Public Memory..	149
Chapter Three: 'The Slave of Slavery': Race and Reconstruction.....	168
4.1. Southern Women and Race: Sarah Piatt and Mary Chestnut.....	168
4.2. A Child's Party: Inheriting Mastery.....	176
4.3. 'The Slave of Slavery': The Black Princess.....	187
4.4. Iron Chains and Glad Songs: Over In Kentucky.....	200
4.5. The Old Slave Music: Piatt's Language of Mourning for the South.....	210
Conclusion: Entertaining the Dead.....	227
Appendix 1.....	231
Appendix 2.....	251
Bibliography.....	253

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This thesis is dedicated to Constance Mary Clay-Thomas, 1909-2003, in loving memory.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is all my own work. It neither incorporates work from another degree nor from published material. It has not been previously submitted to another university.

Summary

The American poet Sarah Piatt (1836-1919) addresses crucial dilemmas of modern identity, in particular the traumatic effects of war, the complexities of racial relationships and the unsettling dynamics of urban life. Although a respected poet in her day, Piatt's work disappeared after her death from the canon of American literature, and it is only in the last five years that scholars have begun to realise the importance of her poetry and to assess its depth and scope. This thesis contributes to the process of assessing the significance of Piatt's work, and contextualises her in relation to a number of other nineteenth-century American writers, including Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Walt Whitman, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mary Chestnut and Frederick Douglass.

I focus on the rift between Piatt's Southern plantation childhood and her married life in the industrial North, and upon how the Civil War created irreconcilable conflicts and divided loyalties in her life, which are played out in her writing. I emphasise the Civil War as a moment of personal and cultural trauma, which inaugurates what I term Piatt's 'politics of mourning'. I explore her politics of mourning in relation to psychoanalytic theory. While Freud sought to rid mourning of its ambivalence and interminability, and to displace these onto melancholia, Piatt's writing blurs the boundary between them. Instead of dispensing with mourning too quickly, too easily, Piatt recognises that one cannot avoid being haunted by the past and by the dead. She engages in a dialogue with the past and explores how the desire of the dead continues to be played out by the living.

In contrast to Northern writers like Phelps, Stowe and Whitman, who seek to heal the nation by appealing to the idea of sacrifice, and the pastoral, in order to console the bereaved and envisage a redeemed body politic, Piatt turns away from consolation. Instead, she takes mourning in a direction that leads towards an exploration of the uncanny, the ghost-like and the hallucinatory. She explores the stifling effects of mourning in the South, and the way in which the North buried the unpleasant realities of the war, in the process of memorialising it.

Piatt remained deeply emotionally invested in the South, yet she was also very critical of the Confederate Cause, and in her work she repeatedly interrogates her own investment in an idealised version of the antebellum South. I examine the ways in which Piatt scrutinises Southern discourses of race and slavery. I focus in particular on how she seeks to articulate a language of mourning for the South while also repeatedly exposing, and destabilising Southern fictions of mastery.

A Note on the Text

The text for all the poems cited is taken from Paula Bernat Bennett's selected edition of Piatt's work, *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), with the exception of 'Oh, Singer at my Window', which is taken from an unpublished manuscript in the Ohio Historical Society Archive. Bennett takes as her copy text first versions of poems printed in magazines and periodicals, where available. Appendix I contains the original magazine versions of all the poems by Sarah Piatt that have been cited at any length in the thesis, with indications of subsequent variants. Appendix II contains a complete list of Piatt's volumes of verse, with publication dates.

The letters written by Sarah and John James Piatt are extant in manuscript form in a number of different archives, which are listed in the footnote to each letter. I am grateful to Paula Bernat Bennett for access to her transcriptions of the letters.

Epigraph

*Oh, Singer at my Window.
To a Bird that Sang in the early Dawn, under my Window by the Sea-Shore.*

*Oh, Singer at my Window, in the deep
Leaf-loneliness, singing the dead awake!
Touched by your song, I will arise and shake
The mortal from me. Heavy and blind with sleep,
The living lie. Backwards to them I'll creep,
Oh, Singer at my window, for your sake,
To kiss the dearest mouth on earth awake
(With lifted eyes that shall forget to weep)
And kiss the dearest mouth on earth good-bye,
I will not leave one footprint in the dew.
I'll break with Sorrow. Then, with one long cry,
Greet Sea and salt with tears! – that never knew
Such love as mine, – we part! ... Take wing and fly.
Then, sing me, Bird, out of the world with you.*

Sarah Piatt,
Queenstown, Ireland, 1890.
Unpublished manuscript, Ohio Historical Society.

Introduction

Sarah Piatt and Genteel Poetics.

Between the appearance of her juvenilia in 1854, and her last known published piece in 1911, Sarah Piatt produced over 600 poems. Many of these address crucial dilemmas of modern identity, in particular the traumatic effects of war, the complexities of racial relationships, and the unsettling dynamics of urban life. Yet since her death in 1919, her work has been erased from the canon of nineteenth and early twentieth-century literature, and it is only within the last five years that scholars in America have begun to realise the significance of her oeuvre. Her writing is now beginning to be included in anthologies of nineteenth-century poetry, and the publication in 2001 of a selected edition by Paula Bennett allows scholars to have access, for the first time, to its range and complexity. While it is outside the scope of this thesis to give an exhaustive response to exactly why her work vanished so completely from view after her death, her strongest poems all have a number of attributes that are antithetical to canonisation as such. Their syntactic complexity and the instability in relation to temporality and subjectivity which they figure, as well as the way in which Piatt frequently deploys a gender-identified sentimental discourse to

carry unconventional, unwomanly sentiments, all make her poetry difficult to come to terms with and categorise in ways that would allow it to be assimilated into literary culture. My concern in this thesis is to explore how these aspects of her poetry allow her to articulate what I shall term a 'politics of mourning' in relation to the Civil War, slavery and the Old South. In particular, I will consider the way in which Piatt's articulation of loss and grief allows us to extend and complicate our own perception of what it means to mourn in a postwar society.

In order to understand Piatt's politics of mourning, we need first to look at how she situated herself as a poet and gain an understanding of the cultural milieu in which she was writing. First, I will contextualise her poetry in relation to her biography, publishing history and reception by contemporary critics and modern scholars. Secondly, I will situate Piatt in relation to the genteel aesthetics of mid to late nineteenth-century American poetry. Thirdly, I will give a more precise definition of her politics of mourning. Her contemporary, Sigmund Freud, gives one of the most persuasive and culturally pervasive accounts of mourning, yet it is based on a rationalist opposition between mourning and melancholia. Given the way in which his version of mourning has permeated the modern understanding of grief, it is necessary to contextualise Piatt's poetry in relation to his theorisation of mourning. We encounter numerous ghosts in Piatt's writing: ghostly armies, soldiers, lovers, children, and even Christ, as well as the ghosts of cultural institutions and ideals, most notably slavery and the South. With reference to Jacques Derrida's work on haunting, I will go on to explore how this ghostliness relates to the recognition in her

work of the ways in which the past and the dead have a continuing claim on the present.

I

Biography and Publishing History

Sarah Piatt's oeuvre represents a substantial body of work, and poses a formidable challenge to the genteel, sentimental outlook of so many of her contemporaries. Her writing is broad in scope, and engages with a range of subjects including gender, motherhood, child death, religion, and the plight of the poor, and she employs a variety of genres: social and political satire, elegy, moral allegory and heroic tales. During a period living abroad in Ireland she also wrote a number of political poems that address the social injustice and poverty suffered by the peasants there. In this thesis I focus on her poetry about the Civil War, slavery and the South because it is in dealing with these topics that Piatt's poetic voice is at its most forceful, and it is here that she articulates, with the most sophistication, a politics of mourning. Yet mourning is far from being limited to these topics in her work, and I suggest that we read these poems as a means of opening up the way in which she uses mourning as a political strategy in the rest of her writing, especially in the poetry about child death and Ireland. Her poetry about the Civil War, the South and slavery was for the most part published in magazines and newspapers rather than in her volumes of verse.

making it far less easily available to modern scholars. When it is excluded from her oeuvre it is possible to mistake Piatt, as most readers have done, for a genteel writer and nothing more, but its inclusion means that even her more conventional poetry has to be read with the awareness that it is seldom as 'genteel' as it might first appear.

Despite being a well-known poet in her day, Piatt's work has largely been ignored since her death, or when it has been remembered, dismissed as conventional and sentimental. Her husband, the poet John James Piatt – whose work exemplifies the genteel mode of verse – was remembered as a literary figure long after she had been forgotten. In 1931 her name appeared in the *Biographical Dictionary of American Authors*, which notes that, 'her verse [is] tastefully feminine and relatively free of the conventionality and self-indulgence that characterized the poetry of her female contemporaries...'² Virginia Terris, writing in 1981, comments more generously that

P[iatt]'s melancholy tone and modesty of scope were doubtless rooted in the female literary conventions of her time...her poems express...the unhappiness of a woman of talent and intelligence restricted by her role as the wife of another poet who received [the] acclaim and satisfaction that was denied her.³

In 1981 her writing received a damning indictment from Jean Hanawalt, in the only full-length study of it undertaken so far. Although she approaches Piatt's work from a

² See *American Authors, 1600-1900: A Biographical Dictionary of American Literature*, ed. by Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1938)

³ Virginia Terris, 'Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt', in *American Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide from Colonial Times to the Present*, ed. by Lina Mainiero, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing co., 1981), pp.387-388, (p.388).

feminist perspective, she makes no distinction between Piatt and her husband, claiming that

...[t]heir poems and those of their fellow writers spoke to the concerns of Victorians on both sides of the ocean; they affirmed the cherished, inherited values regarding work and family and community, and they asserted the role of literature as the chief source of inspiration and even escape from the facts with which daily life presented them. Poems embracing these ideals affirm the satisfactions of home and family with an occasional look at the attendant anxieties; they examine the role of woman as sweetheart, wife, and mother; they celebrate and sentimentalize children and childhood.⁴

It is only very recently that scholars have begun to take Piatt seriously as a significant poetic voice of the nineteenth century. William Spengemann, for example, in his recent anthology, observes that her poems are, ‘unusually fresh’ and free of sentiment and pieties, that she has a gift ‘of making even the most commonplace themes and forms her own, the most conventional sentiments believable’.⁵ Yet even in praising Piatt, Spengemann still implies that she is essentially a conservative writer who offers a somewhat original take on conventional themes. The problem with his presentation of her work is that he takes his selection of poems from Piatt’s volumes of verse (which were compiled by her husband) rather than from magazines and newspapers. Thus, while he does include one or two of her stronger poems, ‘The Palace-Burner’ (1872), for instance and ‘Army of Occupation’ (1866),⁶ his sample of her poetry

⁴ Jean Allen Hanawalt, ‘A Biographical and Critical Study of John James and Sarah Morgan (Bryan) Piatt’, (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Washington, 1981), p.27

⁵ William Spengemann and Jessica F. Roberts, *Nineteenth-Century American Poetry*, (New York: Penguin, 1996), p. xxiii.

⁶ Spengemann dates the publication of the ‘The Palace-Burner’ as 1874 and ‘Army of Occupation’ as 1878. These dates, however, are inaccurate as first publication dates. While ‘The Palace-Burner’ appeared in *A Voyage to the Fortunate Isles*, (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1874, reprinted 1877), it was first published in *The Independent* magazine (1872). Similarly, ‘Army of Occupation’ appeared in *A*

makes it easy for the reader to be left with an impression of her as a genteel poet, albeit an unusually skilled and original one. In contrast, Paula Bernat Bennett's recent edition of Piatt's work - the only selected edition of her poetry ever published - includes poems from contemporary periodicals and newspapers as well as from her books of verse, and as a result offers a far broader range of her poetry, including her most demanding poems about the war, slavery and the South. Bennett's edition represents the most serious challenge to the image of Piatt as a minor writer of conventionally sentimental verse. She argues persuasively that it is only when we explore the periodical and newspaper poetry that we can gain a sense of Piatt's originality and of the full extent of her subversion of genteel stylistics. Bennett also points out that the fact that she has been viewed as a genteel, sentimental poet until so recently is ironic, given that contemporary reviewers frequently criticised her for being too unorthodox and for failing to conform to conventional poetic norms. Before exploring these genteel poetic norms in more detail, however, we need first to take a brief look at Piatt's life and publishing career.⁷

Sarah Morgan Bryan was born on her maternal grandmother's plantation near Lexington, Kentucky, in 1836. Her family were wealthy and well-connected – an 'old family' – and through her father's side she was related to Daniel Boone, the explorer who is credited with 'discovering' Kentucky. Her mother died in 1844, after which she went to live at her maternal grandmother's plantation (the setting for her poem 'A

Woman's Poems (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1871, reprinted 1878) but it was first published over a decade earlier in *Harper's Weekly*, (1866).

⁷ I have relied on Hanawalt (1981) and Bennett (2001) as the sources of information about Piatt's biography and publishing history, as they provide the most reliable and detailed accounts of her life and of the publication and reception of her work.

Child's Party'). After her grandmother died she lived with her father and her new stepmother, but this stay proved to be short-lived, and she was moved again, this time to her Aunt Annie Boone's household in New Castle, Kentucky where she lived until her marriage. At this time she also attended Henry Female College, from which she graduated in 1855. As well as studying science and maths there, she gained a comprehensive knowledge of literature and was influenced by the romantic poets, especially Byron.

In 1861 she married John James Piatt, an aspiring young poet from Ohio, and the couple moved out of the South permanently. They settled first in Georgetown Heights, just outside Washington, where John James worked as a clerk in the Treasury Department. In 1867 he lost this position, although he managed to gain a temporary post in Cincinnati shortly after this, as editor of *The Cincinnati Chronicle*. The Piatts then moved again, this time to North Bend, Ohio, (a suburb of Cincinnati) where they built a house. Throughout their married life together they were dogged by financial insecurity. Despite an increasing number of offspring to feed, (Sarah bore one daughter and seven sons, two of whom died in childhood accidents and another in early infancy), John James was never able to hold down a job for very long. He gained a series of patronage positions in the government, but apart from a post as American consul in Ireland between 1882 and 1893, none of these lasted. The Piatts spent much of their time moving from place to place – Washington DC, County Cork and Dublin in Ireland, with trips to New York, Boston, London and Paris - although they always returned to their old home in North Bend. After their return from Ireland,

the Piatts spent the last years of their lives there. By this time their financial situation had become desperate, forcing them to depend on handouts from friends in order to survive. John James was in very poor health for several years and died in 1917. After his death Sarah lived with one of her sons in New Jersey, until her death in 1919.

Sarah Piatt's publishing career was a long one, and she was a well-known and respected poet in her day, in spite of the ambivalence of many reviewers. Her poems first began to be published in the *Louisville Journal* and the *New York Ledger* while she was still in her teens. Overall she produced seventeen volumes of verse, the majority of which were published by the prestigious Northeastern publishing houses Houghton Mifflin (New York and Boston) and James R. Osgood (Boston) as well as by Longmans and Sampson Low in London.⁸ That her books appeared in England as well as North America, together with the fact that many were reprinted several years after their original publication date (see Appendix II), suggests that they sold well. In addition to her books of verse, Piatt's poems appeared in numerous literary periodicals, most of which were large-circulation, Northern publications. These included the highly respected and conservative (at least in its attitude towards women) *Atlantic Monthly*, which printed thirty of her more sentimental poems as well as *Scribner's Monthly*, *Harper's Monthly* and *Harper's Bazaar*. Her work also appeared in more liberal periodicals like *The Independent*, *Galaxy*, and *Overland Monthly*, and popular children's magazines such as *Wide-Awake* and *St. Nicholas*, as well as being published in England and Ireland in the *Windsor Magazine* and the *Irish Monthly*. Many of her most complex and sophisticated poems were also printed in the

⁸ For a complete list of the titles and publication dates of her books, see appendix.

Capital newspaper, published in Washington by Donn Piatt, her husband's politically outspoken and idiosyncratic cousin. Unlike John James, who preferred his wife to produce undemanding verse, Donn was one of the few people who encouraged her to write political poetry.⁹ Yet John James, in spite of his conventionality, recognised her talent and was supportive of her writing. He did his best to further her career, and through him she came into contact with some of the most important literary figures of the time, including William Dean Howells, James Russell Lowell, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Walt Whitman, Edmund Clarence Stedman, Richard Henry Stoddard, Andrew Lang, Katherine Tynan and Dora Sigerson. If John James knew many famous people, however, he also had an unfortunate habit of inadvertently irritating them by begging for favours and taking umbrage at the slightest provocation. So although he promoted her writing by assembling collections of her verse into books and sending poems to journals, the reception of her work was hampered by his unpopularity.

Piatt herself has always been represented by those who knew her as being uninterested in the publication of her work. Contemporary accounts describe her as modest and retiring, with no desire to become a literary celebrity. An account of the Piatts' home life together that was included in the volume, *Poets' Homes* in 1877, depicted Sarah Piatt as being

...as little of the literary woman as it is possible to be, and one might dine at the cottage from one New Year until the next without suspecting his hostess

⁹ See Bennett's comments on Donn Piatt, in the introduction to *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), p.xxviii.

of active authorship. She has no regular hours for writing, and cannot be persuaded to make it the aim and business of her life. Her poems are written out-of-doors if possible. Her composition is rapid, - some of her most finished poems have been written at one sitting.

It is striking evidence of her lack of personal ambition, that every poem of hers that has been published since her marriage has been copied and given to the public by the hands of her husband, who, most happily for us, has had a good deal of ambition for her. To Mr. Piatt we owe the pleasure of her books. Her own hand would never have collected her poems... her daily life is devoted, patiently and happily, to her household cares, and to her children. As a Southerner, before her marriage, her people having been slave-holders, she had slight experience in domestic matters, and none of the training which falls to the lot of [N]orthern women. But with all her cares she has taught her children to read and write, and has instructed them largely in all their early lessons.¹⁰

Clearly, the author of this piece, Richard Henry Stoddard (who was himself a prominent member of the New York literary establishment), believed that a lack of literary ambition was commendable in women. His comment about Piatt's refusal to make writing the aim and business of her life resonates with Robert Southey's infamous advice to Charlotte Bronte that, '[l]iterature cannot be the business of a woman's life and ought not to be...'¹¹ He also mentions her early inexperience in domestic matters that resulted from her family being slave-holders and, presumably, having slaves to do everything for them. Stoddard is not attacking her – he praises her industriousness – yet her Southern origin was clearly a stigma, and something that she had to be seen to have left behind her. As his remark suggests, being a Southerner made it more difficult for her to be accepted by the Northern literary establishment. Stoddard's hostility towards women taking a public role, like his disapproval of Piatt's Southern background, reflects commonly held attitudes at that time despite the

¹⁰ *Poets' Homes* edited by Richard Henry Stoddard and others, (Boston: D. Lothrop and Company, 1877), pp. 66-67.

¹¹ See *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology*, ed. by Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1995), p.152

large numbers of women whose writing was being published in books, newspapers and periodicals. Stoddard's account does not, however, tell us very much about Piatt herself, although she seems to have charmed him and been willing to play along with his depiction of her as a demure poetess, writing 'out-of-doors' in an unpremeditated, artless – and therefore appropriately 'feminine' – fashion.

The writer Katherine Tynan, who became a friend of the Piatts during their years in Ireland, also mentions Piatt's avoidance of publicity. She describes how

Mr. Piatt was always collecting carefully little scraps of verse dropped about by his wife, waiting for their completion, and sending them to various magazines before collecting them into books. I doubt very much if she would ever have sent out a poem of her own into the world.¹²

In his correspondence, John James refers several times to the process of selecting and organising his wife's poems into volumes and of sending them off to the publisher, and he also claims that they and their copyright are his own property.¹³ In a letter to E.C. Stedman, Sarah herself protests, somewhat coyly, that she disliked seeing her own work in print.¹⁴ She refers to one of her books of poetry as

...not my book after all, but Mr. Piatt's! I have nothing to do with it – further than to protest earnestly and humbly against its publication. Yet for his sake, I am much pleased by your good words in behalf of some of the verses.¹⁵

¹² *Memories*, Katherine Tynan, (London: Eveleigh Nash and Grayson, 1924), p.181.

¹³ Letter to Edmund Stedman, June 6th, 1900. Columbia University Library, letters of John James Piatt to Edmund Clarence Stedman.

¹⁴ Edmund Stedman was an influential critic in New York in the latter half of the nineteenth century. He also produced the very popular poetry anthology, *An American Anthology*, (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1900), which included some of Sarah Piatt's more sentimental poems.

¹⁵ Letter to Edmund Stedman, January 9th, 1910. Columbia University Library.

The tone of this letter suggests that at least in part, she adopted the persona of the shy poetess as a convenient fiction. She is able to admit to being pleased by Stedman's praise of her verse, while at the same time maintaining that it is John James who is the one seeking the opinion of the literary world. Her insistence that she allowed her writing to be published only so as to humour her husband is certainly implausible. Quite apart from the fact that her juvenilia had already been published in newspapers several years before she met him, the sheer number of her poems that were published in periodicals suggests that Piatt was not naive about the literary market, and was adept at writing poems that would appeal to public taste and sell well.

Indeed, a much earlier letter written by her husband sheds a rather different light on her attitude towards publication. Writing to his father in 1874, John James remarks disapprovingly that his wife

... has used most of her little leisure time in writing for money. She has a sort of insane notion that she must pay, herself, for the children's clothing and school. She has done it for a year or two now.¹⁶

While revealing the extent to which John James wished to control the publication of her work, this letter suggests that Piatt was pragmatic, if not ambitious in publishing her poetry, and that she was capable of sending it to editors independently of her husband. Piatt herself commented in a letter to her son Guy that,

¹⁶ From a letter to John Bear Piatt, Washington, February 5th, 1874. Piatt family papers, Stirling Library, Yale.

[M]en have themselves to think of! And they have women – alas! – to provide for whether they think of them or not! All the means of support – money – are in their hands and no matter what we earn they think they are supporting us! They can't help it.¹⁷

The extent of her frustration at being forced to occupy a position of financial dependence is at odds with her image as a diffident and unworldly poetess. Certainly it is ironic that the image of Piatt as uninterested in publication and devoted solely to the private sphere of the home seems to have functioned as a useful public persona, which satisfied the expectations of editors and the reading public. (It is also likely that this authorial pose mollified her husband. While promoting her work alongside his own, his possessive attitude towards it suggests that he was jealous of her greater literary success). Another letter to Guy written in the same year, provides the strongest evidence that her reputation as a poet mattered to her a great deal:

I am by all odds perhaps the most distinguished woman in America! Women naturally care more for such things than men. My name and [illegible] have gone, so to speak, on the wings of the wind, wherever the English language is spoken. We [she and John James] have both had literary and social honours in our own country, and out of it – in the very “Metropolis of the world”, as they call it! Yet here we are – as obscure as any atom of dust under the “chariot wheels” of the [moneyed] and official Nobodies of the hour...¹⁸

Written at a time when they were anxiously awaiting news from the president as to whether John James was to be offered a second post as consul in Ireland, this letter reflects considerable ambition and pride in her own achievements (and her husband's) on Piatt's part, as well as bitterness at the lack of material security and the

¹⁷ From a letter to Guy Piatt, November 3rd, (1891?) Piatt family papers, Stirling Library, Yale.

¹⁸ Letter to Guy Piatt dated October 21st, (1891?) Piatt family papers, Stirling Library, Yale.

powerlessness of their situation.¹⁹ Piatt, then, while posing as an artless singer of sweet verse, was actually highly invested in her reputation as a poet. Well read, and well informed about the political issues of the day, she wrote poetry that engaged with the ‘metropolis of the world’, as well as with painful personal experiences (for example the death of her infant son in ‘Her Blindness in Grief’, published in *The Independent*, in 1873). Frequently in her work, personal suffering reflects injustice on a much wider scale, as in ‘Rachael at the Lodge’ (*The Independent*, 1885), where the death of a peasant woman’s baby reflects the harsh oppressiveness of the social system in Ireland. At the same time, as well as producing sophisticated and politically outspoken work, she wrote plenty of poetry that conformed to, rather than challenged, conventional tastes. This is illustrated by the selection of her work that appears in the third edition of Rufus Griswold’s popular anthology, *The Female Poets of America* (1873), which includes such titles as ‘Two Blush-Roses’, ‘Earth in Heaven’ and ‘Of a Parting’, all of which exemplify the genteel aesthetic.²⁰

II

Shapes of a Soul: Piatt and the Genteel Aesthetic

‘Genteel’ means, literally, belonging to the gentry, having habits characteristic of superior station. To be genteel is to be polished, well bred, polite, elegant, and it was these qualities that defined mainstream bourgeois verse. In terms of nineteenth-

¹⁹ John James was not, in the end, offered another post as consul.

²⁰ See Rufus Griswold, *The Female Poets of America*, with additions by R.H. Stoddard, (New York: James Miller, 1873), pp. 443-446

century American writing, the ‘genteel’ is roughly synonymous with the sentimental. I use the term ‘genteel’, because it is a term that encompasses *both* male and female authors, reflecting the fact that men – far more men than women in fact – were writing verse that modern critics would term ‘sentimental’. Since Ann Douglas’s attack on sentimental literature in her influential study, *The Feminization of American Culture*, sentimentality has come to define nineteenth-century American women writers. Douglas attacks writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and the poet Lydia Sigourney for their ‘debased religiosity [and] their sentimental peddling of Christian belief for its nostalgic value’,²¹ yet these ‘sentimental’ qualities and the bourgeois domestic ideology that accompanied them, were equally apparent in men’s writing. Even critics such as Cheryl Walker and Annie Finch, who aim to defend nineteenth-century women poets, write as though female subjectivity were inseparable from sentimentality. Finch, for example, sees women poets as alienated from the ‘egocentric model of poetry...based on the male-defined poetic tradition of romanticism’.²² She describes nineteenth-century women’s poetry as lacking in a ‘privileged central self’. For Finch, this lack, together with the elevation of public, communally shared values such as religion and family love is what gives poetry

...that quality we have defined as “sentimental”... it is in poetry, of all art forms, that sentimentality is hardest to accept, because it is there that the post-romantic reader most expects to find the central self reinforced. In contrast to a still-recognized poet like Longfellow, who might be called “sentimentalistic” because his communal, conventional themes appear in poems in which metaphors and lyrical structures issue from a central poetic

²¹ Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), p.6

²² Annie Finch, ‘The Sentimental Poetess in the World: Metaphor and Subjectivity in Lydia Sigourney’s Nature Poetry’, *Legacy*, 5, (1988), 3-18, p.4

self, the nineteenth-century American poetesses wrote poems that are sentimental in structure as well as theme.²³

The critic Kirsten Silva Gruesz has recently pointed out that in defining the sentimental aesthetic in terms of a lack of a central subjectivity, Finch risks transforming the sentimental into something that is transhistorical and “essentially” feminine.²⁴ In fact, male writers such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, William Cullen Bryant, James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Bayard Taylor and their many imitators, produced the kind of gushing, nostalgic poetry that has been associated with women writers (for example Longfellow’s 1844 poem, ‘The Day is Done’ or his famous consolation poem, ‘The Reaper and the Flowers’. 1839). Poetry that is characterised as genteel (rather than sentimental) tends to be associated with the male ‘Fireside’ poets like Longfellow, Lowell and Bryant, who were producing poetry that dealt with topics that were deemed pure and noble, in formal and exalted language. Gruesz describes their poetic as

...a masculine civic poetry that offers up authentic interiority in the Romantic tradition, but does so in the service of a collective aim: to engender a family feeling among dangerously isolated subjectivities. The process is dialectical, for it requires an alternating assertion and effacement of the lyrical ‘I’. William Charvat long ago identified this “public poetic stance” as the primary mode of the Fireside Poets, but it resonates as well with the ambivalent self-abnegation of the speaking subject that [Cheryl] Walker, [Emily Stipes] Watts and other feminist critics identify as the defining feature of nineteenth-century women’s poetry.²⁵

²³ Finch, p.5

²⁴ Kirsten Silva Gruesz, ‘Feeling for the Fireside: Longfellow, Lynch and the Topography of Poetic Power’, in *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture*, ed. by Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 43-63, (p.45)

²⁵ Gruesz, p.49

She goes on to point out that readers of Longfellow's first collection of poetry identified this 'publicly private' form of expression as explicitly masculine. Reviewers praised the 'manly resolution' and 'generous, genial manhood' of his verse, and Longfellow's brother remarked that the volume represented a new species of poetry, 'the mental in contradiction to the sentimental – the healthy in opposition to the morbid'.²⁶ Yet the volume, far from transcending the 'sentimental' and the 'morbid', contained several tear-jerking consolation poems like 'The Reaper and the Flowers' and 'Footsteps of Angels'. While genteel poets like Longfellow may have liked to emphasise their manliness and vigour alongside the nostalgia and emotionality of their writing, on the page, their poetry is often hard to distinguish from that of 'sentimental' female writers. It is also worth pointing out that while male writers - Frederick Douglass for example - in common with female authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lydia Sigourney, and the abolitionist poet Frances Harper, used heightened sentimentality as a rhetorical strategy aimed at bringing about social reform, genteel sentimentality tended to be apolitical. So although genteel verse idealises bourgeois domestic ideology, it lacks the force and political commitment of sentimental protest literature.²⁷

²⁶ Gruesz, p.49

²⁷ Paula Bernat Bennett divides sentimental writing into the categories of 'high' and 'low' sentimentality. She defines high sentimentalism (c. 1825-1850) as an epistemologically based discourse that claimed that, 'the intuitions of the heart could serve as reliable guides to moral and spiritual truths'. Bennett argues that high sentimentality, despite the constraints that it placed on women, bestowed on them a source of 'unimpeachable poetic power (the heart), as well as an unimpeachable sphere of influence (the home). Low sentimentality, on the other hand, which came into vogue around 1860, did not legitimate women as authors in the way that high sentimentalism had done. Instead it was 'loose, subjective, personal, [making] no claims to knowledge, only to feeling'. According to this model, most genteel verse produced by writers like John James Piatt would fall into the category of 'low sentimentalism'. Bennett's categorisation provides a useful indication of the way in which 'the sentimental' although a dominant discourse in the nineteenth century, was multifaceted rather than monolithic. See Paula Bernat Bennett, ' "The Descent of the Angel": Interrogating

This apolitical, genteel mode of verse is epitomised by the work of John James Piatt, who was an earnest imitator of the Fireside poets (according to Katharine Tynan he ‘set Longfellow among the Immortals’).²⁸ His poem ‘The Last Fire’ (1864) provides a representative sample of his poetry.²⁹ In the poem, the male speaker addresses his wife on the eve of leaving their first home behind. He describes their old home in terms of its, ‘flushing firelight, rosy-warm!’ (line 13) and its ‘walls with many a floating form/Of dreamy shade a-bloom!’ (line 15) and he then goes on to describe his wife in similarly idealised terms:

20 Beloved and bless'd and beautiful,
God-given, Angel by my side!
The winter came and went,
And never, since the world began,
Grew sweeter happiness to man,
Or tenderer content. (Stanza 4)

.....

By tenderest tides of feeling stirr'd
Your heart brings tears for every word:
I hear you murmur low,
“Here blossom’d Home for you and me-
35 Love walk’d without his glamour
And stood diviner so. (Stanza 6)

In stanzas eight and nine, the speaker realises that despite leaving their home behind,

Domestic Ideology in American Women's Poetry, 1858-1890, *American Literary History*, 7, (1995), 591-609, p.606, n.2.

²⁸ Tynan, p. 192

²⁹ The poem was published in the collaborative volume, *The Nests at Washington and Other Poems*, John James and Sarah Piatt, (New York: Walter Low, 1864), pp.49-51.

...the place beloved shall be
 Bequeath'd to loving Memory:
 45 The spirits of the place,
 The Lares of the household air.
 Born of the heart, the heart must bear-
 They know no stranger's face.

The atmosphere we fill is ours:
 50 It moves us with its sun and showers;
 It is our world alone,
 Vivid with all our souls create
 The plastic dream, the stone of Fate –
 We take and keep our own.

He then concludes triumphantly:

So let the Last Fire flame and fall,
 The ghostly ember-shadows crawl,
 The ashes fill the hearth:
 The cricket travels where we go,
 And Home is but the Heaven below
 60 Transfiguring the Earth! (Stanza 10)

The domestic hearth, presided over by the 'Angel' wife is presented as the epitome of heaven on earth. The tears that the woman sheds, and her verbal testament to their 'divine' love, mediate the overflow of the male speaker's emotion as well as her own. He, meanwhile, is able to take a paternal stance and reply to her tears by saying that they will take their home with them in memory and – in an unintentionally stifling image – that they will remain enveloped in its 'atmosphere'. Unwittingly, John James' poem demonstrates the narcissism and narrowness of domestic ideology. The home provides a refuge that admits no 'strangers' and instead becomes 'our world alone', keeping the threatening outside world at bay. In the final stanza the speaker concludes that although about to set out again on their travels, he and his wife can be

safe in the knowledge that they take their own domestic contentment with them. The intention is to suggest that this domestic happiness will keep them secure in the world and provide them with a foretaste of heaven. Yet it also leaves the reader with the impression that wherever they travel the couple (or at any rate the male speaker) will remain myopically snug in this domestic bliss, unwilling to engage with the larger world outside the home. Much of John James Piatt's poetic output (which included numerous volumes of poetry) was written in this vein. He was seldom able to resist the impulse towards nostalgia and idealisation – of the home, of the West and the Frontier, and of 'America' itself. As Paula Bernat Bennett notes, the idea that 'insight' – truth – could be glimpsed in the simple and mundane was a commonly held view at the time and is evident in the work of far more competent genteel writers than John James.³⁰

This emphasis on the ideal, and on the dichotomy between reality and ideality, lies at the heart of the American genteel aesthetic. In 1855 James Russell Lowell, who was one of the most highly esteemed poets and critics of his day, likened the role of the poet to that of a seer, able to discern the 'shadow of heaven' that lies behind the visible universe. For Lowell, the aim of successful poetry was to uplift readers and remind them of the ideal:

Whoever reads the great poets cannot but be made better by it, for they always introduce him to a higher society, to a greater style of manners and thinking. Whoever learns to love the beautiful is made incapable of the low and mean

³⁰ See Paula Bernat Bennett, 'John James Piatt (1835-1917), Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt (1836-1919)' in *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Eric L. Haralson (Chicago and London: Fitzroy Demborn, 1998), pp.328-334. (p.330)

and bad... He who translates the divine into the vulgar, the spiritual into the sensual, is the reverse of a poet.

The poet, under whatever name, always stands for the same thing – imagination. And imagination in its highest form gives him the power, as it were, of assuming the consciousness of whatever he speaks about.... as regards expression, it seems to enable the poet to condense himself into a single word. Therefore, when a great poet has said a thing, it is finally and utterly expressed, and has as many meanings as there are men who read his verse. A great poet is something more than an interpreter between man and nature; he is also an interpreter between man and his own nature. It is he who gives us those key-words, the possession of which makes us masters of all the unsuspected treasure-caverns of thought, and feeling, and beauty which open under the dusty path of our daily life.³¹

This passage exemplifies the conservatism of genteel aesthetics. Poetry as highbrow art offers the passport to social betterment - a more refined style of manners and thinking - as well as a way of transcending the vulgar materiality of daily life. The imagination, rather than seeking to defamiliarise the everyday or to challenge either the poet or the reader's framework of values, instead allows the poet, in his role of interpreter, to lead the reader towards mastery of the world around him and the triumphant realisation of self-presence.

What is at stake here is the relationship between power and the imagination. The poet, Lowell tells us, has the power of assuming the consciousness of whomever and whatever he chooses: 'assuming' in the sense of taking on the colours of, becoming at one with, his chosen subject. Inevitably, this also has connotations of making assumptions about, taking for granted, acquiring. Similarly, just as the poet's consciousness moves seamlessly (and non-reciprocally) into that of his subject, so poetic meaning flows into the consciousness of the reader. Language is effaced in

³¹ James Russell Lowell, *Literary Criticism of James Russell Lowell*, edited by Herbert F. Smith, (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1969) pp.7-8

favour of meaning, and meaning itself is always unproblematically determined by authorial intention. Thus, even though meaning seems for a moment to proliferate – ‘there are as many meanings as there are men who read his verse’ – the utterance of the truly ‘great’ poet is what secures it ‘finally and utterly’, bringing semantic play to a halt rather than opening it up. Ultimately, this account of poetic language is one that effaces the textuality of texts, purging language of any uncertainty or opacity. Instead it becomes a transparent medium that offers a glimpse of the divine, uplifting the reader to a privileged epistemological position and creating a heady experience of possession and control. This poetics of mastery reflects the complacent acceptance of the status quo by poets like Lowell, Longfellow and John James Piatt. Genteel writers had their moments of melancholy and doubt, to be sure, but ultimately they never seriously questioned their core beliefs. For them, God was omnipotent and in control, ‘progress’ and the conquest of new lands was a good thing, and life, for all its vicissitudes, never really *changed*.

Sarah Piatt herself was a highly competent practitioner of this mode of writing, producing poems that, although unremarkable, were polished, witty, and pleasing to the ear. While her genteel verse was anthologised and viewed with approval, however, her more unconventional and experimental poetry displeased her reviewers. Her frequent departures from the norm made the critics view her with uncertainty, and their praise of her work was almost always qualified by a sense of bafflement if not hostility. Her writing was, in the words of one critic, too ‘studied

and hard' and 'artificial' rather than 'artless'.³² Even William Dean Howells, a friend and admirer of her work, cautioned her in a review that, 'Our geniuses are not so many that we can afford to have any of them fall a prey to eccentricity or self-conceit – that way, madness and Browningism lie.'³³ Another reviewer, writing in *Scribner's Monthly*, comments with some justification that,

...her conceptions are no doubt clear to her, but they are frequently obscure to others. Her situations may be striking from a psychological point of view, but they are not such as commend themselves to the eyes of common men...she not only demands an apprehension which is denied to the many, but she demands also that they shall forget the language which is natural to them, and learn the language which is natural to her – a primitive speech, so to speak, because it leaves so much to be supplied by intuition and imagination. It is wayward, abrupt and enigmatic, and prolific in hints and innuendoes, and questions it neglects to answer.³⁴

This reviewer has put his finger perspicaciously on those elements in her poetry that did not conform to contemporary expectations. His main objection to her writing is its 'obscurity', and this is not an unreasonable allegation. Piatt frequently projects her readers straight into the middle of a dialogue between two or more speakers and demands that we piece together the situation from 'hints and innuendoes' and fragments of speech. Even then it is usually impossible to gain a complete sense of who the speaker or speakers are and the precise nature of their circumstances. Instead, she prefers to leave things 'enigmatic' and unresolved, and to deprive us of a sense of closure. This compressed and elusive style is difficult enough for any reader to come

³² 'Mrs. Piatt's Poems: A Review of *That New World And Other Poems*', in *Scribner's Monthly*, 14. (May, 1877) 118-119, p.119.

³³ 'Some New Books of Poetry'. Review of *That New World*, by William Dean Howells, *Atlantic Monthly*, 39, (1877), 87-89, p.89.

³⁴ 'Recent Poetry By Women'. Review of *Dramatic Persons and Moods*, in *Scribner's Monthly*, 19. (1880), 634-635, p.635.

to terms with, but to nineteenth-century readers of genteel verse it was complete anathema. Contemporary readers expected poetry to be smooth and ‘musical’, and to lend itself to being read aloud, whereas Piatt’s metres tend to be uneven and rough. Although she never entirely dispenses with a regular rhyme scheme, her lines are driven by the rhythms of the speakers’ dialogue, with expressive emphases and pauses and frequent use of enjambment. Thus, rather than a polished verse form which yields up an easily accessible ‘meaning’ or moral, her poetry follows the rhythms of everyday speech and is rooted in the material world rather than in the realm of the ideal.

Apart from stylistic considerations, reviewers found her work unpalatable because of the way in which it challenged the status quo. A letter that John James wrote to the poet and critic Bayard Taylor, defending her poetry, is revealing about contemporary expectations of poetry (especially poetry written by women) and the way in which her work upset these:

I see the [Boston] Globe (Whipple, I suppose) has an advance review... in which he exaggerates, it seems to me, the “questioning and unquiet [spirit]” of the poems of “That New World.” Yet the second piece “Enchanted” is a mystical or poetic picture of the most intense faith, on the part of a deeply wronged, exiled world-worn, in the birthright awaiting her; “The Altar at Athens”, acknowledging that God is unknown to us (as the Bible teaches), recognizes his worship in the forms of religion... “Counting the Graves” shows only a woman’s absorption in her maternal grief and her first real knowledge of death through its cause; “Home Again” expresses the most orthodox view of the hereafter, and “Calling the Dead”... surely expresses the most cheerful...outlook, or at least suggests it. To be sure there is little of the mouthing of commonplace religious [forms]... characteristic of New England male and female verse writers – “Thy will be done”, “All is well”, etc.³⁵

³⁵ John James Piatt, letter to Bayard Taylor, November 21st, 1876. Kroch Library, Cornell University.

The fact that John James is so keen to stress the ‘intense faith’ and ‘cheerfulness’ of her poetry suggests that the reviewer had seen quite the opposite in her poems. This letter is significant because it reveals the way in which her poetry does not conform to religious orthodoxy. Instead it frequently sounds despairing and comes dangerously close to challenging God’s will rather than accepting it. It is also apparent that John James, who was himself often guilty of mouthing commonplace pieties, was prepared to defend his wife for refusing to do so. This is surprising given the way in which her poems frequently constitute a direct challenge to the prim, conventional view of the world that he espouses in his own writing. Her poem ‘Shapes of a Soul’ (*Galaxy*, 1867), for instance, could be read as a riposte to John James’ ‘The Last Fire’. The poem opens with a set of romanticised images of femininity:

White with the starlight folded in its wings,
And nestling timidly against your love,
For this soft time of hushed and glimmering things,
You call my soul a dove, a snowy dove.

5 If I shall ask you in some shining hour,
When bees and odors through the clear air pass,
You’ll say my soul buds as a small flush’d flower,
Far off, half hiding in the old home-grass. (Stanzas 1-2)

The ‘you’ being addressed seems to be the female speaker’s lover or husband, who insists on seeing her in idealised terms. Yet the speaker herself is sceptical of these stock images of femininity:

Ah, pretty names for pretty moods; and you.

10 Who love me, such sweet shapes as these can see;
 But, take it from its sphere of bloom and dew,
 And where will then your bird or blossom be?

Could you but see it, by life's torrid light,
 Crouch in its sands and glare with fire-red wrath,
 15 My soul would seem a tiger fierce and bright
 Among the trembling passions in its path.

And could you sometimes watch it coil and slide,
 And drag its colors through the dust a while,
 And hiss its poison under foot, and hide,
 20 My soul would seem a snake – ah, do not smile!

Yet fiercer forms and viler it can wear;
 No matter, though, when these are of the Past,
 If as a lamb in the Good Shepherd's care
 By the still waters it lie down at last.

(Stanzas 3-6)

The speaker distances herself from her lover's 'pretty names', and stresses the gap between the language that he uses to describe her and her own subjectivity. In contrast to the dove and the flower which he likens her to, she calls herself 'a tiger', wrathful and passionate, and a venomous snake. In the final stanza, however, the speaker disavows the images of herself that trouble conventional ideals of femininity. She ends by looking forward to a time when she will be reclaimed by the 'Good Shepherd' and admitted into heaven (on the condition of leaving her earthly self behind). Even so, the tension between these competing versions of female selfhood remains unresolved. While the poem ends by envisaging her soul lying meekly at rest in heaven, it does not cancel out the alternative images supplied of her as a tiger and as a snake, but merely looks forward to a future time – after her death – when these qualities (and her mortal self) are safely banished to the 'Past'. The implication is that she is only angelic because the male addressee insists on situating her in a 'sphere of

bloom and dew'. In other words, her timidity and sweetness – her femininity – are not intrinsic or natural, but a product of his blind adoration. If he were to view her by the 'torrid' light of day, he would lose this idealised version of her, but he would also be able to see her in her entirety. As it is, he seems only capable of wanting an angel for a wife.

This poem does attempt to reach some kind of resolution, albeit rather uneasily, via the final image of lying down by still waters, which echoes the twenty-third Psalm, 'He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters' (v.2).³⁶ This image also resonates in a later poem, 'We Two' (*The Independent*, 1874), which does not appeal to the Bible as a means of resolution, but rather presents a direct challenge to conventional interpretations of the Bible. It is perhaps no coincidence that this poem was published only a year after Piatt's infant son had died. In the first two stanzas the speaker addresses a second person, apparently another woman:

God's will is – the bud of the rose for your hair,
The ring for your hand and the pearl for your breast;
God's will is the – the mirror that makes you look fair.
No wonder you whisper: 'God's will is the best.'

- 5 But what if God's will were the famine, the flood?
And were God's will the coffin shut down in your face?
And were God's will the worm in the fold of the bud,
Instead of the picture, the light, and the lace?

³⁶ The King James Bible, Psalm 23, v2, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

The speaker is critical of the ease with which the addressee, without having experienced real hardship, piously invokes 'God's will' as the cause of everything. She concludes by stating in the final stanzas,

God's will unto me is not music or wine.
 With helpless reproaching, with desolate tears
 God's will I resist, for God's will is divine;
 20 And I – shall be dust to the end of my years.

God's will is – not mine. Yet one night I shall lie
 Very still at his feet, where the stars may not shine.
 "Lo! I am well pleased" I shall hear from the sky:
 Because it is God's will I do and not mine.

Here, instead of being the good shepherd, God is represented as a tormentor whose will entails the relentless and malevolent crushing of opposition. At the end of the poem the speaker does not envisage death as leading her to heaven. Instead it is the final defeat, leaving her prostrate before Him. This poem, however, goes a step further than 'Shapes of a Soul', even as it echoes it, because it does not accept the orthodox idea that God is benevolently overseeing everything. Yet the poem is not pessimistic, although it expresses negative feelings. On the contrary, rather than simply being a negation of God's will, the speaker's despair constitutes a positive and deliberate 'resistance' to it.

As we shall see in more detail in later chapters, the significance of Piatt's writing lies in the way in which she does away with the comforting illusion of a higher spiritual realm and unchangeable order of things by creating a poetics that privileges uncertainty and indeterminacy. Genteel poetics seeks to efface its own

representational status in order to present itself as determined by unquestionable truth rather than by ideology. In contrast, Piatt exposes poetic language *as representation* and in doing so robs it of its truth status. Instead of attempting to transcend the world of everyday life, she reflects it (with all its injustices, uncertainties and enigmas) back at us, without proffering any easy answers or solutions. Her mature poetry, particularly those poems that deal with slavery and the Civil War, brings us face to face with the experience of non-mastery. In and through its textual complexity, her writing often presents us with a moment of impossibility where we cannot choose, finally, between conflicting viewpoints and interpretations. Piatt was, of course, not the only poet who defied conventional norms. Dickinson, Whitman and Melville as well as a number of less well-known writers such as Harriet Prescott Spofford (1835-1921), Rose Terry Cooke (1827-1892) and Lizette Woodworth Reese (1856-1935) all wrote poetry that challenged the genteel aesthetic. It is noticeable, however, that with the exception of Lizette Reese, Piatt's is the only Southern voice amongst them.³⁷ It is her ambivalent relation to her Southern heritage as well as her experience of being on the losing side in the war, which sets her apart from Northern writers and determines the complexity of her writing.

In writing about the war, Piatt articulates a poetics of loss in more ways than one. While she sees loss as the severing of ties between mourner and beloved (both in terms of individuals and on a larger social scale) her understanding of loss relates not

³⁷ Reese also wrote poetry that deals with the war and the loss of the South, although her work lacks the range and depth of Piatt's war poetry. For a discussion of Reese's work and a sample of her poetry, see *Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets: an Anthology*, ed. by Paula Bernat Bennett, (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1998), pp.302-310.

only to the death of a loved one, but also to the loss, as Freud phrases it, 'of some abstraction... such as one's country, liberty, an ideal...'³⁸ Freud's phrase has a peculiar relevance when we come to consider Piatt's war poetry because it encapsulates the way in which she experiences a double sense of loss in relation to the antebellum South. As her homeland, it is lost to the conquering Northern armies and it is lost figuratively as an 'ideal' and an 'abstraction'. Yet the mythical idea of the Old South is still a landscape by which she is haunted and which she continues to inhabit imaginatively.

Although Piatt married into a Northern family (who were ardent supporters of the Union) and moved out of Kentucky permanently, she never really left the South behind her. The Piatts' house at North Bend was on a cliff overlooking the Ohio River and Kentucky, and the irony of this was clearly not lost on her. She remarks in her 1872 poem, 'Over in Kentucky' that, '...yonder river, wider than the sea,/Seems sometimes in the dusk a visible moan/ Between two worlds...'. In fact, it seems to have been this very sense of displacement – of being caught between two worlds and belonging wholly to neither – which made it possible for her to articulate her unique perspective on the war and the South. Throughout her writing career in the industrial North, her poetry is fuelled by her ambivalent relationship to the plantation South of her childhood. Politically she seems to have been simply anti-war rather than

³⁸ Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated and edited by James Strachey. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957). pp.243-258, (p.243).

supporting either the Union or the Confederacy.³⁹ Her writing reflects the ambiguity of belonging to a 'border state' in both political and psychological terms.⁴⁰ Certainly the idea of a border state, where two opposing elements co-exist, has particular relevance when we come to consider the ambivalence and contradiction that are inherent in Piatt's poetic language. Her writing not only tolerates contradiction but positively thrives on it, and it is this capacity to reside within a set of contradictions which makes her poetry – particularly the poems about the war – so significant. Unlike most writing on the war, either from North or South, her poetry resists the temptation to come down on a particular side. She seems to have been equally cynical about both Southern and Northern rhetoric that sought to justify the fighting. More fundamentally, the war is, for Piatt, something that casts doubt upon all claims to truth.

³⁹ Piatt's home state of Kentucky was initially under Confederate control. The state, however, became union-controlled after being invaded by Grant in 1862. The Southern half of the state was sympathetic to the Confederacy while the Northern half remained neutral. I am in agreement with Paula Bernat Bennett on the question of Piatt's political affiliations. Bennett cites Piatt's early poem, 'If Freedom's Miracle Should Fail' (1861), to suggest that Piatt aligns herself with the Northern half of her home state in taking a non-partisan position, as the poem's twelfth stanza suggests: 'North – South – wash out your hatred-stains,/ Ere Hope's God-lifted face is pale,/ For tyrants laugh and forge new chains/ If freedom's miracle shall fail.' For a discussion of Piatt's politics in relation to the Civil War, see Bennett's introduction to *Palace Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt*, pp xli-xliii.

⁴⁰ Border states were states in the upper part of the South that were strongly divided between anti-secession sentiment and support for the Confederacy. These included Missouri, Maryland, Virginia and Piatt's home state of Kentucky. In her analysis of Civil War writing by women, Elizabeth Young uses the border state as a metaphor for the instabilities of identity - whether regional, racial or sexual - which were expressed (sometimes inadvertently) by women writers. To illustrate this, Young focuses on the black writer Elizabeth Keckley and on Loreta Janeta Velazquez, the 'Counterfeit Confederate' soldier, both of whom were Southerners from border states. Given that the border state has particular significance for Southern writers, Young's argument is suggestive in relation to how Piatt brings the ambiguity of the border state to the question of mourning and consolation. See, Elizabeth Young, *Disarming the Nation, Women's Writing and the American Civil War*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) pp.123-6 and p.156.

When looked at in the context of other writing on the Civil War, Piatt's outlook bears considerable similarity to Melville's *Battle-Pieces*. Daniel Aaron characterises Melville's book of war poetry as,

...a volume which is in effect a sustained debate between belief and disbelief, which abounds in paradoxes, ironies and conflicts, and which keeps denying what it affirms. No wonder most readers of *Battle-Pieces* were baffled by its point of view...⁴¹

This would also be an apt description of Piatt's war poems and a warning to her readers about what to expect from her poetry by way of 'paradoxes, ironies and conflicts' and an overall tension between belief and disbelief in a range of causes and ideologies. (The 'Lost Cause' of the Confederacy is the site where this tension becomes particularly charged). Unlike Melville or Whitman, however, Piatt rarely focuses on the scene of warfare itself and instead turns her attention to the cost of the war for those who did not fight.

The Civil War was a theme that Piatt continued to engage with throughout her long writing career. It appears in her early poems, for example 'If Freedom's Miracle Should Fail' (*Louisville Journal*, 1861) and 'Hearing the Battle' (*Nests At Washington*, 1864) and it is still in evidence in late poems ('A Party in a Dream', *Independent*, 1883, and 'My Other Gods', *Independent*, 1893). Her most significant writing about the war, however, is concentrated in a cycle of poems written between 1866 and 1873. These poems fall into two categories. The first, smaller group consists in those in which she tends to adopt an overtly satirical voice ('Mock Diamonds'.

⁴¹ Daniel Aaron, *The Unwritten War*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1973) p.88.

Capital, 1872 and ‘Shoulder- Rank’, *Capital*, 1871) or the voice of public elegy, although this elegiac voice is often deliberately undercut (For instance in ‘Army of Occupation’, *Harper’s Weekly*, 1866, ‘Another War’, *Capital*, 1872). The second group of poems features a scenario in which the speaker receives a flower – sometimes a rose or rose-geranium, sometimes a bud – from a lover before he goes to war and dies of a chest wound. Despite the lack of corroborative evidence, it is tempting to speculate that this recurring scene bears some relation to Piatt’s biography. The fact that it features so prominently in most of her war poems and carries such a powerful emotional charge suggests that it does relate to a real-life experience that continued to haunt her, but unfortunately the identity of the mysterious lover (or lovers) remains unknown. These poems, which are linked thematically by this recurring scenario and imagery – the ‘rose’ poems – comprise the bulk of Piatt’s war poetry. They include ‘Giving back the Flower’ (*Galaxy*, 1867), ‘A Hundred Years Ago’ (*Galaxy*, 1870), ‘One from the Dead’ (*Overland Monthly*, 1871), ‘The Grave at Frankfort’ [sic] (*Capital*, 1872), ‘There Was a Rose’ (*Atlantic Monthly*, 1872) and ‘A Ghost at the Opera’ (*Capital*, 1873).

Slavery is a crucial theme in Piatt’s poetry. She left behind no record of her position on slavery in her correspondence, but running through her poetry is a narrative that suggests she formed close ties with the slaves on the plantation where she grew up, in particular with her nurse. She wrote several poems that raise the issue of slavery including, ‘The Black Princess’ (*Independent*, 1872), ‘Over in Kentucky’ (*Independent*, 1872), ‘The Old Slave-Music’ (*Capital*, 1873), ‘A Child’s Party’

(*Wide-Awake*, 1883) and ‘Heredity in Death’ (*Child’s-World Ballads*, 1895). Piatt’s nurse figures in all of these except for ‘The Old Slave-Music’ and ‘Heredity in Death’, and she also appears in an elegy for the Piatt’s son Louis, ‘A Child in the Park’ (*Irish Monthly*, 1891). As with the dead soldier whom we encounter in the Civil War poems, she seems to have been very important to Piatt, although no information about her has come to light outside of the poems. These suggest that this woman was nurse to Piatt’s mother before Piatt herself (see, ‘A Child’s Party’). She also seems to have moved North with the Piatt family and become nurse to Piatt’s own children (see, ‘Over in Kentucky’ and ‘A Child in the Park’), and it is likely that she remained with the family until her death.

III

Piatt’s Hauntology And The Politics of Mourning

Freud’s theorisation of mourning has been crucial in shaping the way in which we think about loss and grief. His preoccupation with it was triggered, at least in part, by the carnage of the First World War. Similarly, Piatt’s poetry was a response to a terrifying and horrific conflict. Published decades before Freud’s famous paper ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1917), her poems articulate a politics of mourning which allows us to interrogate the way in which Freud delimits grief, and in particular his insistence that successful grieving is characterised by its finitude. I will, therefore,

begin with a detailed exploration of how Freud theorises mourning, before going on to discuss Piatt's work. Bearing in mind the way in which her writing is concerned with the return of the past and of the dead, I will end by discussing the issue of haunting in her writing and outline its importance to her politics of mourning.

Freud defines mourning as, '... the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal and so on.'⁴² The hallmark of successful mourning, according to Freud is that it can be brought to an end. Mourning, he tells us, consists in the gradual relinquishing of the affective ties that bind the mourner to the lost object. Faced with the reality of its absence, the mourner is forced to relinquish it:

...[t]he loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition – it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them. This opposition can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis. Normally, respect for reality gains the day. Nevertheless its orders cannot be obeyed at once. They are carried out bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy, and in the meantime the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged. Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is accomplished in respect of it. Why this compromise should be so extraordinarily difficult is not at all easy to explain in terms of economics. It is remarkable that this painful unpleasure is taken as a matter of course by us. The fact, however, is that when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited once more.⁴³

In mourning then, 'respect for reality' finally triumphs and the ego becomes 'free and uninhibited' at the end of this painful process. Or to put it another way: give up the

⁴² Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, p.243

⁴³ Freud, p.244-245

dead and you will be free from mourning. The latter, despite all its painful unpleasure, can eventually be halted, brought to an end, dispensed with. Yet Freud's comment that the extraordinary difficulty of mourning 'is not at all easy to explain in terms of economics' suggests a slight unease on his part.⁴⁴ There is a sense here that something about mourning eludes him and that the complexity of the process is not simply reducible to economics.

In Freud's account, mourning and melancholia are very similar. Both come about as a reaction to loss, and they produce almost identical symptoms:

The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment...with one exception, the same traits are met with in mourning. The disturbance of self-regard is absent in mourning; but otherwise the features are the same. Profound mourning, the reaction to the loss of someone who is loved, contains the same painful frame of mind, the same loss of interest in the outside world...the same loss of capacity to adopt any new object of love...⁴⁵

The melancholic, unlike the mourner, loses not only his capacity to love, but also his sense of self-esteem. It is this loss of self-regard that differentiates melancholia – a 'pathological' condition according to Freud – from mourning, which is a 'normal' reaction to loss. In mourning, Freud asserts, 'there is nothing about the loss that is

⁴⁴ Freud frequently refers to 'economics', by which he means quantities of energy and the circulation of energy. See *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, ed. by J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, (London: Karnac Books, 1988), pp.127-130.

⁴⁵ Freud, p.244

unconscious’,⁴⁶ whereas melancholia arises from more complex causes. The melancholic may know, ‘*whom* he has lost, but not *what* he has lost in him’. suggesting that the object loss is withheld from consciousness.⁴⁷ It is this complexity, the fact that the loss is, as it were, hidden from view in the unconscious, which characterises melancholia. It is failed mourning - grief that does not loosen its hold on the subject and allow him to form other attachments. Instead, rather than withdrawing from the lost object and forming new ties, the libido becomes displaced onto the ego:

There, however, it [is] not employed in any unspecified way, but serve[s] to establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object. Thus the shadow of the object [falls] upon the ego, and the latter [is] judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object.⁴⁸

Freud goes on to explain that melancholia contains something more than mourning because the subject’s relation to the lost object is complicated by ambivalence. This ambivalence takes the form of, ‘countless struggles [that] are carried on over the object, in which love and hate contend with each other’. Freud speculates that these violent struggles remain entirely unconscious because traumatic experiences relating to the object have activated other repressed material. Whatever the reason, everything to do with this psychic conflict remains firmly restricted to the unconscious until the libido eventually does abandon the object, only to retreat into the ego itself:

So by taking flight into the ego, love escapes extinction. After this regression of the libido the process can become conscious, and it is represented to

⁴⁶ Freud, p.245

⁴⁷ Freud, p.245

⁴⁸ Freud, p.249

consciousness as a conflict between one part of the ego and the critical agency.⁴⁹

In both mourning and melancholia, in other words, loss of the object threatens the ego with destruction. The mourner is, however, able gradually to relinquish the object and take up new ones, even if only at great expense in terms of psychic energy and emotional pain. In the case of melancholia, while the object may be relinquished, the ‘libidinal cathexis’ – the tie that binds the object to the ego – is not severed, and so cannot become attached to a new love object. Instead, the melancholic *identifies* with the object that is lost: love takes flight into the ego and so escapes extinction. To give up the lost object would mean admitting his anger and hatred towards it. Because the relinquishment of the object is a procedure too threatening to be undertaken, the melancholic directs the hatred and anger that he feels towards it at himself, while his psyche continues to be dominated by the object. Thus the anger that he feels is expressed in terms of self-loathing and self-reproach, but this is at bottom directed towards the lost object, from which he has failed to detach himself.

Melancholia is, then, a failure to let go of the past, of what is lost. It is a form of failed grief – grief that becomes grievance - where the subject both knows and does not know what has been lost. What is striking about this description, however, is not so much the complexity and ambivalence inherent in melancholia itself, but the way in which Freud asserts that these are *not* present in mourning. For Freud, mourning is unquestionably the saner, healthier, more manageable response to loss, as opposed to the pathology of melancholia. Yet this account of mourning is not entirely

⁴⁹ Freud, pp.256-257

convincing. As Jacqueline Rose points out, in a passage which is worth citing at some length,

...what is this love that, in mourning as opposed to melancholia, steadfastly, dedicatedly, works to extinguish itself?... we could turn back onto Freud his famous observation that no subject can envisage his or her own death. Love would not be love if it were able to contemplate, let alone work to bring about, its own end.

And what is Freud doing when he makes ambivalence a peculiarity of the melancholic[?]. We might ask not so much what distinguishes mourning from melancholia, but what is it about mourning that Freud is using melancholia to shed? It starts to look as if melancholia is being asked, among other things, to carry off the most violent part of identification. Mourning can be mollified, pacified, if melancholia bears the brunt of an ambivalence which Freud describes as nothing less than a struggle to the death...

One by one or, to use Freud's own words, "bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy", the cornerstones of psychoanalysis – the unconscious, identification, ambivalence, and love – are purged from the mind. All this – in 1917 at least, as the relentless toll of the dead brings belief crashing to the ground – for sanity's sake. There is only so much, we might say, that even psychoanalysis can bear.⁵⁰

To suggest that love can simply be brought – can bring itself – to an end, and that mourning is free from ambivalence and from unconscious content does indeed seem to fly in the face of Freud's own theories. His insistence that mourning can finally be worked through and completed is, as Rose succinctly puts it, '...strange for a psychonanalysis which maintains that nothing ever goes away'.⁵¹ Why, then, is Freud so invested in this version of mourning? Rose's suggestion that Freud's theorisation of mourning is influenced by the crisis of the First World War is persuasive. In his 1915 paper 'On Transience', Freud describes how the war destroyed the countryside and buildings in its path as well as shattering people's belief in culture and 'civilization':

⁵⁰ Rose, pp. 5-6

⁵¹ Rose, p.1

It tarnished the lofty impartiality of our science, it revealed our instincts in all their nakedness and let loose the evil spirits within us which we thought had been tamed for ever by centuries of continuous education by the noblest minds. It made our country small again and the rest of the world far remote. It robbed us of very much that we had loved, and showed us how ephemeral were many things that we had regarded as changeless

We cannot be surprised that our libido, thus bereft of so many of its objects, has clung with all the greater intensity to what is left to us, that our love of our country, our affection for those nearest us and our pride in what is common to us have suddenly grown stronger.⁵²

The war, Freud explains, is destructive not only in terms of the loss of life and property, but also because it reveals the underside of human nature, 'the evil spirits within us'. Suddenly science, art and philosophy seem meaningless when confronted with human frailty and death on such a large scale. Faced with this uncertainty, the reaction is to 'cling with all the greater intensity to what is left us... our love of our country, our affection for those nearest us and our pride in what is common to us'. In other words, as a defence against the horror of war and its power to undermine individual and national self-belief, the populace takes refuge in patriotism, national pride and a narrowing of vision. It is noticeable that he does not critique this reaction; in fact, far from considering national pride as a contributing factor in the causes of war, he seems to regard it as one of the few things to be salvaged from it. He continues by asking whether all that has been lost because of the war really is so perishable after all. While it may seem that way, Freud believes that this is not the case, and argues that those who think this way and seem ready to make a 'permanent renunciation' because what was precious has proved not to be lasting, do so because

⁵² Sigmund Freud, 'On Transience' (1915) in *Sigmund Freud: Art and Literature* trans.by James Strachey ad edited by Albert Dickson, (London: Penguin, 1990), pp.283-290, (p.289).

they are in a state of mourning for what has been lost. And mourning, he assures his readers, comes to 'a spontaneous end', however painful it may be. When it has renounced everything that has been lost, the libido is once again free to replace the lost objects with new ones that are, 'equally or even more precious'. Freud believes that the same will be true of the losses caused by the war:

When once the mourning is over, it will be found that our high opinion of the riches of civilization has lost nothing from our discovery of their fragility. We shall build up again all that war has destroyed, and perhaps on firmer ground and more lastingly than before.⁵³

For Freud, one of the most destructive effects of the war is a loss of belief in 'the riches of civilization'. Western culture has lost faith in itself, or rather, in its own capacity to be 'civilized', but this is a symptom of mourning rather than a permanent condition. Grief even on a national scale, Freud stresses, can be worked through and got over. Once it has completed this process, society will rebuild itself and carry on as before. To quote Rose again, 'mourning [for Freud] must come to an end so we can believe in ourselves once more.'⁵⁴ Yet oddly, in his paper 'On Transience', only a few paragraphs earlier than the one cited above, Freud remarks that, 'to psychologists mourning is a great riddle, one of those phenomena which cannot themselves be explained but to which other obscurities can be traced back.'⁵⁵ Far from offering a comforting sense that things will work out – that mourning follows a coherent narrative which, in the end, will restore our faith in all that has been lost – it is presented here as the ultimate enigma, the point at which certainty vanishes. This

⁵³ Freud, 'On Transience', p.290

⁵⁴ Rose, p.1

⁵⁵ Freud, 'On Transience', pp.288-289

brings us back to his comment that there is something about it that exceeds his language of economics. This is as close as he comes to an acknowledgement that, try as he might, he cannot banish its more troubling aspects. His solution, as we have seen, is to displace the interminability of mourning onto melancholia. Doing so allows him to shore up his own belief in (an idealised version of) Western civilization. Taken this way, his assertion that ‘we shall build up again all that the war has destroyed and perhaps on firmer ground and more lastingly than before’ begins to sound more like a chilling repetition of the past, than a hopeful vision for the future.

Mourning, therefore, once it is purged of its ambivalence and uncertainty, and once it is ‘worked through’, allows us to take up new attachments in order to replace all that has been lost. Implicitly then, it leads us back to where we started precisely because the emphasis is on *replacing*, on finding a substitute for the lost object. Freud’s paper on transience plays out the limits that he places around the idea of mourning in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’: while mourning may allow us to reconfigure what has been lost, this reconfiguration cannot –should not – be too radical. Read thus, his paper itself begins to look like a symptom of mourning because of his insistence that all that has been lost can still be recovered, *rebuilt* rather than transformed. Or to put it another way, he is still refusing to relinquish what has been destroyed. The moment when Freud most confidently asserts that the end of mourning is in sight is also the point when he reveals himself to be most tightly in its grip. The moment when he claims that mourning is masterable, is when he is most blind to its effects.

An alternative to this blindness – this moment of repetition – might be to avoid an attempt to claim mastery over mourning and instead to reckon with mourning as non-mastery. The ‘politics of mourning’ that gives its title to this thesis and by which I seek to identify Piatt’s work, consists in precisely this refusal to claim mastery. While I do not intend simply to situate her as a melancholic in contrast to the ‘successful’ mourner, what I want to suggest is that her poetry allows us to blur the boundary between mourning and melancholia that Freud defines so rigidly. Piatt enables us to explore those aspects of mourning that Freud marginalises as melancholic (particularly ambivalence and interminability) and to situate them at the heart of mourning. In this way, what he understands by the term ‘melancholia’ can be seen as a refusal, rather than a failure to bring mourning to an end. As we have seen in his writing, once mourning is divested of its uncertainty – made masterable – it is all too easy to fall back on forms of certainty (in Freud’s case, a belief in the ‘riches’ of Western civilization) that prove to be false and damaging. By reckoning with the interminable nature of mourning, Piatt avoids falling into this trap. While non-mastery might seem to suggest political disenfranchisement, mourning in her work actually generates an uncertainty that is politically enabling. Thus rather than taking refuge in Christianity’s consoling narrative of resurrection, or in the myth of an idealised antebellum South, Piatt examines her own investment in these and in doing so destabilises them and holds them up to scrutiny.

Piatt's politics of mourning might be compared to Jacques Derrida's idea of 'hauntology'.⁵⁶ He creates this term to refer to the 'haunted-ness' of being – the idea that presence, (as well as absence), is always in some sense haunted and that history itself is ghostly, always capable of coming back in some form or other. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida is preoccupied with haunting on a number of different levels. Among these is the idea of the spectre of Marx – the way in which Marx's ideas continue to haunt us, as well as the idea that his texts are already themselves haunted by a number of different contexts of thought. Derrida uses the motif of the ghost of the dead father in *Hamlet* as a way of exploring the themes of inheritance and of mourning. He also uses the appearance of the Ghost as a means of thinking through what exactly a spectre might be said to be, given that it is something which troubles the very category of *being*. A ghost, Derrida tells us, is

...a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes... some "thing" that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other. For it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition, in the very coming of the *revenant* or the return of the specter... *It is* something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it *is*, if it exists, if it responds to a name and corresponds to an essence. One does not know, not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge. At least no longer to that which one thinks one knows by the name of knowledge. One does not know if it is living or if it is dead. Here is – or rather there is, over there, an unnameable or almost unnameable thing: something between something and someone, anyone or anything, something, "this thing" and not any other, this thing that looks at us and concerns us [*qui nous regard*], comes to defy semantics as much as ontology, psychoanalysis as much as philosophy...⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Of course, Jacques Derrida's own work on death and mourning is heavily indebted to Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' paper and to psychoanalytic thought generally.

⁵⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, Translated by Peggy Kamuf, (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p.6

A ghost, then, by its very nature is a contradiction in terms: a thing that lacks materiality and solidity, a thing which is not anything, but which is nonetheless *there*. To encounter ghostliness is thus to be confronted with non-mastery, with something which defies all systems of knowledge, but which nevertheless demands a response from us. It is this moment of encounter with ghostliness – the sense of being ‘looked at’ by something other, as Derrida puts it – which is at stake in Piatt’s writing. I will be arguing that to read her poetry is to be confronted with ghosts and ghostliness: she writes, as it were, in response to ghosts. What we might think of as Piatt’s hauntology, is her attempt to figure the effects of haunting and to come to terms with the haunted-ness of being. Hence, as we will see, the density of her poetic language, her complicated syntax and the way in which she presents temporality as not straightforwardly linear but rather intertwined, so that past, present and future are knotted together. By saying that she writes in response to ghosts, I am not, however, saying that she simply attempts to pursue them so that they may, finally, be laid to rest and banished (in other words mastered). Rather, I am saying that she recognises that one cannot *not* be tied to the past, to the dead. To be tied to the dead is to be subject to a ghostly address, but this address, this interpellation by the dead, is distinct from possession. For possession implies a form of dispossession – of being in the grip of the other and forced blindly to obey its injunction, rather than being able to respond creatively to it. Interpellation, on the other hand, implies that while one *must* respond to the other, there is a choice in *how* one responds. For Piatt this necessity of responding to the dead is also a form of responsibility to them. To forget them – to

bring mourning to an end too hastily – is to refuse to recognise that one cannot avoid being haunted. But to *solely* remember is to become paralysed by the past, possessed by it. Thus Piatt refuses to bring mourning triumphantly to an end, as Freud does. Instead she engages in dialogue with the dead, and this allows her to interrogate the way in which the desire of the dead continues to be played out by the living.

* * *

Finally, I want to give a brief chapter summary of the thesis. In the first chapter I will examine mourning and consolation in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' best-selling novel, *The Gates Ajar* (1868).⁵⁸ In anticipation of Freud, Phelps attempts to foreclose mourning - to bring it triumphantly to an end - though unlike him she does so in order to restore the mourner's faith in God. The immense popularity of this novel in the years immediately following the war and the contemporary responses to it, coupled with the critical discussion about it that has developed in recent years, have contributed significantly to our understanding of mourning in the postbellum period. The book provides an index of contemporary ideas about mourning, consolation and femininity that is a crucial context for understanding Piatt's writing about the war. It is also particularly useful to look at Phelps' novel because, although it was written in a similar milieu to Piatt's poetry, it deals with mourning very differently. Phelps (1844-1911), like Piatt, came from a well respected, 'old family' and she too lost her mother at an early age. She also belonged, as did Piatt, to the generation of women who lost loved ones in the Civil War and witnessed its devastating effects on American

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Gates Ajar*, ed. by Helen Sootin Smith, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1964).

society. Phelps was raised in Andover, Massachusetts, a descendent of a long line of Puritan ministers, and was brought up according to strictly orthodox Calvinist tradition. *The Gates Ajar* is her attempt to break free from this upbringing. In the novel, she attacks Calvinism's failure to address the suffering of those who had been bereaved by the war or to offer consolation, and explores the ways in which patriarchal religious ideology sought to delimit and control women's expression of grief in the wake of the war.

Piatt, like Phelps, is concerned with the effects of loss both on individuals and in terms of society at large, and with the way in which grief can be articulated through the voice of the female mourner. In chapter two I move on to explore Piatt's war poetry, beginning with a detailed reading of 'One from the Dead', the most complex and intricate of the 'rose' poems. I also explore poetry written about the war by two Northern writers, Walt Whitman and Harriet Beecher Stowe. I focus on the way in which these writers, like Phelps, seek to repair the damage inflicted on the national psyche by the war: Stowe appeals to a redemptive narrative of Christianity in order to console the bereaved, while Whitman turns to the pastoral in order to envisage a redeemed and unified nation. I then move on to look at the role of public memory in relation to mourning in two more of Piatt's poems, 'Army of Occupation' and 'Another War'. Through close readings of these poems, I examine how Piatt's vision of mourning differs from that of Phelps, Whitman and Stowe in a number of ways. It is these differences that I use to complicate and extend the existing critical framework that surrounds mourning. One of the most significant differences between

Piatt and these other writers is the fact that she is a Southerner while they are Northerners. Despite the huge numbers of Northerners who had lost their lives, the North itself was not subject to the absolute devastation that was wreaked on the South. Thus while it was still possible for Phelps to turn to a beneficent spiritual world as a means of consolation for a country 'dark with sorrowing women',⁵⁹ and to envisage heaven as a comforting re-embodiment of antebellum provincial life, such a consoling vision of heavenly re-embodiment was simply not available to Southerners in the immediate postwar years. Had she been a Northerner, it seems far less likely that Piatt would have been able to take mourning in the direction that she does – one that leads away from consolation towards an exploration of the 'self-haunted self'.⁶⁰ The cost of this, one might say, is that Piatt no longer has access to a comforting vision of heaven or indeed of human nature. Instead she allows 'the spiritual, the uncanny, the mythical, the ghost-like, the haunted and the hallucinatory to fracture consciousness along innumerable planes.'⁶¹ In exploring her Civil War writing we will investigate the way that she articulates rather than suppresses the uncanny, the hallucinatory and the haunted, and explore why these tropes are so powerful as a means of figuring the effects of the war. We will also focus on the Southern 'Lost Cause' and the way in which Piatt interrogates myths of Southern heroism and martyrdom.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *Chapters From a Life*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1897), p.96.

⁶⁰ Jay Martin, 'Ghostly Rentals, Ghostly Purchases: Haunted Imaginations in James, Twain and Bellamy', in *The Haunted Dusk, American Supernatural Fiction, 1820-1820*, ed. by Howard Kerr, John W. Crowley et al, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983) p.126.

⁶¹ Martin, p.126.

In my final chapter, I examine Piatt's poems about slavery and contextualise them in relation to other contemporary writers, both Southern and Northern, including Mary Chestnut, Frederick Douglass, Stowe and Mark Twain. Through close readings of 'A Child's Party', 'The Black Princess', 'Over in Kentucky' and 'The Old Slave Music', we will focus on the way in which Piatt's writing bears witness to the complex legacy of mourning which slavery left behind and the way in which mourning disrupts categories of 'blackness' and 'whiteness' in her poetry. Taking Mary Chestnut's assertion at the end of the war that, '[f]orgiveness is impossible while love lasts'⁶² we will explore how the question of 'forgiveness' - not only between North and South but also between blacks and whites - is played out in Piatt's writing. It is essential to note at this point that we will not be dealing with the issue of Piatt's relationship to the Old South in a separate chapter. The thematic categories in her poetry tend to be fluid and overlapping, especially in relation to the war, slavery and the Old South. To attempt to delineate sharply between them would be to simplify her work and lose sight of its range and complexity. Instead, as we explore Piatt's representations of the war, slavery and race in the second chapter and in the final chapter, we will consider the way in which her ambivalent relation to the Old South inflects her politics of mourning in relation to these issues.

⁶² Mary Chestnut, *Mary Chestnut's Civil War*, ed. by C. Vann Woodward (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p.836.

Chapter One

“Being Only out of Sight”: Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and the Problem of Mourning in Postbellum Society.

I

‘A Material Miasma’: Grief and the Failure of Consolation in Postbellum America.

Nearly thirty years after the 1868 publication of *The Gates Ajar*, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps remarks in her autobiography that,

“The Gates Ajar” was attacked by the press. In fact, it was virulently bitten. The reviews of the book, some of them, reached the point of hydrophobia...Religious papers waged war across that girl’s notions of the life to come as if she had been an evil spirit let loose upon accepted theology for the destruction of the world. The secular press were scarcely less disturbed about the matter; which it treated, however, with the more amused good-humor of a man of the world puzzled by a religious disagreement.¹

Despite the outrage that the book provoked amongst the theological establishment, it went on to sell over 80,000 copies in America during the next three decades, and over 100,000 copies worldwide. It launched the literary career of its twenty-year old author who received hundreds of letters of thanks from grateful readers. The book was

¹ Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *Chapters from a Life*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1897), p.97.

written as a response to the cultural crisis of the Civil War, although its long-lasting popularity abroad as well as in America suggests that its consolatory message of heavenly re-embodiment had resonance above and beyond its immediate context. Yet first and foremost *The Gates Ajar* deals with the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. As Lisa Long points out, it is a novel that, 'clearly attends to a society in mourning' and at the same time registers the cultural shifts and upheavals precipitated by that process.² That it became such a successful bestseller indicates that it resonated in a profound way with the needs of postbellum society. It is a text in which that well-worn phrase 'cultural work' acquires a particular significance and urgency in the form of mourning. The intensity of public response either in the form of heart-felt gratitude or 'virulent' outrage reflects the way that the book makes visible the tensions that were surfacing in the wake of the war, tensions which are also legible in Piatt's writing.

The novel charts the emotional and spiritual progress of Mary Cabot, a young woman whose brother, 'Royal', has been killed in battle. After his death Mary experiences a crisis of faith. Unable to believe that a loving God could allow Royal to be taken from her, her crisis of faith is made worse by the fact that the church offers her no consolation or promise of being reunited with Royal in the afterlife. Instead her minister preaches resignation to a coldly incomprehensible divine will, and presents heaven in abstract theological terms. It is only when Mary's Aunt Winifred comes to visit and offers her an alternative religious doctrine that she is saved from despair.

² Lisa Long, 'The Corporeity of Heaven: Rehabilitating the Civil War Body in *The Gates Ajar*', *American Literature*, 69 (1997), 781-811, p.786.

Basing this doctrine on her own, unconventional reading of the Bible, Winifred teaches that the dead are not lost but only out of sight, and that heaven is a material realm where we will be reunited with our dead loved ones. Winifred's importance lies not only in her religious teaching, but also in the way that she allows Mary to express her grief and accompanying sense of alienation, rather than simply to disavow it. It is not difficult, then, to see why Phelps' book was so popular after the war, in spite of the hostile criticism it received from the religious establishment. Through Mary's predicament, Phelps articulates not only the alienating effects of grief on the individual but also the upheaval and discontinuity – the sense of fracture – in postwar society. At the same time, she offers the promise of a tangible spiritual reward for the losses that so many people had experienced and the sacrifices that they had been forced to make.

As I suggested in the Introduction, *The Gates Ajar* is particularly significant in relation to Piatt's war poetry because Phelps and Piatt share the same cultural moment, and are preoccupied with similar issues in relation to the Civil War. Both writers share a concern with the social and individual effects of loss and the way in which these can be articulated through the voice of the female mourner. Women's writing about the Civil War has for a long time been largely invisible or deemed to be irrelevant because it is removed from the battlefield where the 'real' action takes place.³ Phelps and Piatt illustrate that this is far from being the case. This is reflected by the way in which both of them engage with the devastating legacy that the war left behind, rather than the

³ See Long, p.783.

scene of battle itself. In her autobiography Phelps describes this legacy as one of mourning:

Our gayest scenes were black with crape. The drawn faces of bereaved wife, mother, sister, and widowed girl showed piteously everywhere. Gray-haired parents knelt at the grave of the boy whose enviable fortune it was to be brought home in time to die in his mother's room. Towards the nameless mounds of Arlington, Gettysburg, and the rest, the yearning of desolated homes went out in those waves of anguish which seemed to choke the very air that the happier and more fortunate must breathe.

Is there not an actual, occult force in the existence of a general grief? It swells to a tide whose invisible flow covers all the little resistance of common, human joyousness. It is like a material miasma. The gayest man breathes it, if he breathe at all; and the most superficial cannot escape it.⁴

The most striking aspect of this description is the palpability of grief. Phelps might have spoken of death as being the miasma that hangs in the air, choking off the life and hope of future generations. Instead it is grief that is figured as the unmanageable 'occult force' that threatens common, human emotion. This description signals Phelps' preoccupation with the social effects of death, a preoccupation, in other words, with the way in which grief and mourning, as the public face of collective national trauma, carry the weight of all that is most unbearable and difficult to articulate about such trauma. Like *The Gates Ajar*, Piatt's war poetry is also preoccupied with this legacy of grief and both Phelps and Piatt portray women as being the chief bearers of the burden of mourning.

Modern critical responses to *The Gates Ajar* tend to be polarized between those who see it as a rebellion against the religious establishment in the name of

⁴ Phelps, *Chapters From a Life*, p.97.

emotional expression (Stansell,⁵ Welter,⁶ Schnog,⁷ Long) and those who view it as an escapist fantasy that espouses the benefits of a materialist heaven and denies the reality of the war (Douglas,⁸ Smith,⁹ St. Armand¹⁰). This polarity of opinion is not surprising given the way that the novel deals with emotional extremes and at the same time operates in a way that is essentially contradictory. I will argue in this chapter that the function of *The Gates Ajar* is one of mediation between emotional extremes and structures of containment; between an unmanageable ‘tide of grief’ and the religious doctrine and mourning rituals that Phelps exposes as wholly inadequate in the face of this grief. Through the character of Winifred Forceythe, Phelps offers a means of reinscribing affect within religious and social structures while also revising these existing structures so that they can provide a framework for the expression of emotion instead of its denial. Nancy Schnog argues that Phelps is building on the tradition of antebellum writers like Susan Warner in her deployment of sentimental Christianity as a form of therapy. She views Phelps’ religious discourse as a mode of survival that allows women to teach themselves and each other how to deal with separation and loss, rather than a means of making women subject to regulatory forms of social control. In Schnog’s account of it, the novel is performing psychological work by

⁵ Christine Stansell, ‘Elizabeth Stuart Phelps: A Study in Female Rebellion.’ *Massachusetts Review*, 13 (1972), 239-256.

⁶ Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976) p. 113.

⁷ Nancy Schnog, ‘“The Comfort of My Fancying”: Loss and Recuperation in *The Gates Ajar*.’ *Arizona Quarterly*, 49, (1993) 127-154.

⁸ Ann Douglas, ‘Heaven Our Home: Consolation Literature In The Northern United States, 1830-1880.’ *American Quarterly*, xxvi, (1974), 496-515.

⁹ Helen Sootin Smith. Introduction, *The Gates Ajar*. By Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap-Harvard University Press, 1964), v-xxxiii.

¹⁰ Barton Levi St. Armand, *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp.117-151.

providing consolation to grieving women and interrogatory cultural work in exploring the way in which society regulates female affect in relation to loss.¹¹ Yet, as I argue in this chapter, emotional expression does not escape coercion and antebellum disciplinary tactics resurface in *The Gates Ajar* in modified form. As we shall see, the coerciveness of Phelps' strategy for reinscribing affect into the social fabric is precisely what Piatt seeks to challenge. While Phelps is anxious to restore a sense of continuity and social harmony – to find a way of allowing the community of Northern society to believe in itself once more – Piatt seeks to question the community and its legitimacy in the aftermath of the war.

Like Schnog, Lisa Long reads the novel as addressing 'the difficult issues confronting Civil War doctors and their patients: locating the source of amorphous pain, assigning truth value to invisible suffering, generating the authority to articulate one's experience of these invisible phenomena, and devising effective treatments for the crippling ailments.' She goes on to say that '[r]ehabilitating Civil War bodies becomes a means both of expressing the inadequacy of traditional belief systems (religious, social and medical) and exploring the ontology of postbellum America.'¹² Long demonstrates persuasively that far from denying the reality of suffering or ignoring the war's devastating effects on society, Phelps engages with the revolutions in her changing culture.¹³ At the same time Phelps revitalises abstract religious doctrine so that it becomes a viable form of consolation for the bereaved and a means of healing the spiritual crisis brought about by the war. Long does not, however,

¹¹ Schnog, 127-154.

¹² Long, p. 785.

¹³ Long, p. 785.

address the fact that Phelps' dual enterprise of exploring the rifts in the postwar social fabric and providing spiritual consolation is contradictory. While Phelps provides a provocative, even radical analysis of the disjuncture between religious doctrine and human suffering on a massive scale, she is deeply conservative in the resolutions that she offers: most notably in the way that mourning, while it allows for the expression of female grief, also comes to delimit female subjectivity within the confines of 'True Womanhood'.

Phelps' strategies for reading the Bible are progressive, as Gail K. Smith argues. She points out that Phelps' heaven represents a revision of the tradition of "material" heavenly depictions for a new audience, and an extension of biblical figuration to meet the pastoral needs of the mid-nineteenth century. Smith remarks insightfully that the novel

...validated the interpretive abilities of the ordinary believer by translating dead literalist stereotypes into symbols a more skeptical age found vibrant and pastorally effective.¹⁴

Yet her account, like Long's, does not address the contradiction between Phelps' revisionary strategy for reading the Bible and the conservative vision of heaven that she offers to her readers; a heaven which Ann Douglas describes scathingly as a 'consolation prize' for those who failed on earth.¹⁵ Despite Phelps' clear-sighted analysis of the ways in which religious and domestic structures had been irrevocably altered by the war, the trajectory of mourning in her fiction is designed to lead her

¹⁴ Gail K. Smith, 'From the Seminary to the Parlor: The Popularization of Hermeneutics in *The Gates Ajar*,' *Arizona Quarterly*, 54, (1998), 99-133, p.125.

¹⁵ Douglas, p.515.

readers from the 'troubled constituency'¹⁶ of postwar society to a conservative vision of a rural, domestic heaven. In other words, whilst Phelps identifies the developing rifts in society, her answer is to resurrect the middle-class antebellum earth as an ideal of cultural unity and to superimpose this onto the diversity of postbellum society.

Piatt also engages with emotional extremes and the breakdown of structures of containment but for her, unlike Phelps, the possibility of mediation is no longer viable. This difference is largely attributable to her background. As a Southerner, Piatt is far-removed from the New England Calvinist tradition that Phelps is reworking in her novel. But Piatt's background effects her perspective in a way that goes beyond religious affiliation. As we saw in the introduction, her viewpoint is complicated by the fact that as a Southerner she must come to terms with the complex mixture of guilt, humiliation and loss that is an inevitable consequence of being on the losing side. At the same time, her upbringing in a privileged slave-holding family generates a double sense of loss. Not only is her homeland lost to the conquering Northern armies, it is also lost to her because of her sense of alienation from her Southern background. As Bennett points out, it is Piatt's awareness of 'the corruption on which her "fairytale" Southern childhood was based [that] ironises all that comes after it.'¹⁷ Whilst Phelps is invested in a utopian antebellum heaven, such an investment is impossible for Piatt. Instead, her double sense of loss in relation to the South generates a complex set of

¹⁶ Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels By and About Women in America 1820-70*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p.297.

¹⁷ Paula Bernat Bennett, *Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets*. (Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p.235.

identifications that make mourning particularly problematic in her poetry, as we shall go on to explore in chapter two.

Commenting in 1915 about the effect of the First World War on attitudes towards death, Freud remarks that,

[d]eath will no longer be denied; we are forced to believe in it. People really die; and no longer one by one, but many, often tens of thousands in a single day. And death is no longer a chance event. To be sure, it still seems a matter of chance whether a bullet hits this man or that; but a second bullet may well hit the survivor; and the accumulation of deaths puts an end to the impression of chance.¹⁸

Death, as Freud suggests, demands a wholly different mode of interpretation in times of war, when it presents itself in a form that is at once entirely arbitrary and inescapable. This is also true in terms of postwar society, when, as Phelps shows, death can no longer be viewed in abstract and impersonal terms. Phelps' 'material miasma' of grief graphically illustrates the way that the lingering effects of wartime death transformed postbellum society. *The Gates Ajar* registers the cultural imperative behind the need to find a mode of consolation that would allow grief to be assimilated, re-integrated, 'worked-through', in public as well as personal terms. At the beginning of the novel, grief threatens to undo the female subject. Mary, as an isolated mourner bears the weight of wartime death, in a community that fails to understand or help to alleviate her predicament. Not only do we see her going through an individual process of mourning, but in the course of the novel this process is also mapped onto the wider

¹⁸ Freud, Sigmund, 'Thoughts For The Times On War And Death', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, (Vol. xiv), (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957) pp. 273-301, (p.291).

community that surrounds her. Winifred's doctrine of an embodied heaven becomes the means by which grief, at a social as well as individual level, can be re-integrated into society.

The novel begins with the failure of consolation in the face of overwhelming grief when the protagonist, Mary Cabot, has learned of the death of her brother Royal in battle. She tells us,

If it had not come exactly as it did, it seems to me as if I could bear it better. They tell me it should not have been such a shock. "Your brother had been in the army so long that you should have been prepared for anything. Everybody knows by what a hair a soldier's life is always hanging", and a great deal more that I am afraid I have not listened to. I suppose it is all true; but that never makes it any easier.

The house feels like a prison. I walk up and down and wonder that I ever called it home. Something is the matter with the sunsets; they come and go, and I do not notice them. Something ails the voices of the children, snowballing down the street; all the music has gone out of them, and they hurt me like knives. The harmless, happy children! – and Roy loved the little children.

Why it seems to me as if the world were spinning around in the light and wind and laughter, and God just stretched down His hand one morning and put it out.¹⁹

The extract illustrates how Phelps establishes a tension between the intensity of Mary's sense of loss and the inadequacy of the comfort offered by her community. The failure of the people around her to comprehend her grief is summed up in the comment about the fragility of 'a soldier's life'. That all words of comfort can be distilled into a single utterance suggests the uniformity of opinion surrounding her, and Mary's phrasing of it is suggestive on several levels. '[Y]ou should have been

¹⁹ Phelps, *The Gates Ajar*, p.6.

prepared' is subtly accusatory and 'everybody knows' implies a regulatory mechanism of received wisdom that is coming into play in order to contain and control her display of intense grief. It also shows the extent to which Mary's community is unquestioning in its attitude to the war's carnage. The soldier's life is fragile, contingent, and his death something to be expected. Society, Phelps suggests, is at the very least ignorant of the horrors of death, if not complacent about them, so that a single life is easily swallowed up within the larger context of the war.

The failure of sympathy on the part of those around her establishes Mary's sense of isolation from the rest of the community. As well as this, these opening passages provide a graphic description of the alienating effects of grief. Her home, while it may be a refuge from the rest of society, also 'feels like a prison'; the passage of time, figured in 'the sunsets that come and go', has become meaningless; the voices of the children 'hurt...like knives'. The passage from Phelps' autobiography reads like a later echo of this description of loss, where ordinary emotion is threatened by a 'material miasma'. Mary Cabot's description suggests that grief is somehow other, altering the subject's relation with the rest of the world, so that everyday events are experienced as meaningless and alien, while at the same time grating unbearably on her suddenly vulnerable nerves. Crucially, what has broken down is Mary's sense of connection with the world around her, both in terms of connection with other people and in the sense of being part of a structured system of being, where the house is a sheltering domestic space and the sun rises and sets and the world 'spins around', and where there is a divine system of justice. It is significant, however, that while Mary is

questioning the logic or justice of a God who stretches down his hand and puts everything out, she does not question the existence of God. Thus while the opening chapter of the book signals to the reader that Mary's sense of loss is to be explored in theological as well as emotional terms, the grounds of that theological enquiry are not so much whether God exists at all. Rather it consists of recuperating the divine plan from something essentially enigmatic and unjust into something that resembles a recognizable justice and allows for the possibility of consolation and re-connection in the face of loss.

The predicament Mary finds herself in, of being a mourner in a society singularly ill-equipped to deal with grief on a massive scale, is shared by thousands of newly bereaved women of her generation. Genteel mourning practice could often be an ordeal in itself, as Phelps emphasises in her criticism of the custom of condolence calls. Writing of the condolence system, Mary asks:

Who originated that most exquisite of inquisitions, the condolence system? A solid blow has in itself the elements of its own rebound; it arouses the antagonism of the life on which it falls; its relief is the relief of a combat. But a hundred little needles pricking at us, - what is to be done with them? The hands hang down, the knees are feeble. We cannot so much as gasp, because they *are* little needles.

I know that there are those who like to make these calls; but why, in the name of all sweet pity, must we endure them without respect of persons, as we would endure a wedding reception or make a party call?

...But it is not real friends who are apt to wound nor real sorrowful sympathy which sharpens the worst of the needles. It is the fact that all your chance acquaintances feel called upon to bring their curious eyes and jarring words right into the silence of your first astonishment; taking you in a round of morning calls with kid gloves and parasol, and the liberty to turn your heart

about and cut it at pleasure. You may quiver at every touch, but there is no escape because it is “the thing.”²⁰

Here, as Schnog points out, Phelps critiques conventional mourning practice by illustrating the way in which female affect is ritualized and turned into spectacle.²¹ The intrusion of social convention is figured as a physical assault, further traumatizing Mary and alienating her from the rest of society. This assault is predominantly a female one, and represents a form of social violence. There is something faintly comic about the ‘kid gloves’ and ‘parasols’, but the wounds that these intrusions inflict are real, despite the fact that Mary is a victim of polite society rather than anything more dramatic. The background to this description of wounds being inflicted is the battlefield itself with its scenes of combat that, however dangerous, at least bring some sense of ‘relief’ to the antagonists in allowing the blows to be returned. The condolence system operates as a way of containing grief and giving it an acceptable face of public legitimacy, yet containment and social control are inadequate. The visceral terms in which Mary describes her emotion contrast with the polite form of emotional expression which society expects of her, and exposes the cruelty of those social expectations that ‘cut into’ and violate her privacy. Mary’s emphasis on small affronts and needling, mundane irritations heightens the disparity between social mourning rituals on the one hand and the intensity of her own grief and the large-scale social trauma of the war on the other. In this way Phelps underlines the insufficiency of social responses to the war and the lack of available forms of expression to channel this overwhelming ‘miasma’ of grief and allow it to be mediated within the existing social fabric.

²⁰ Phelps, pp.8-9

²¹ Schnog, p.131

Phelps indicts not only conventional mourning rituals, but also the failure of religious doctrine to offer comfort in the face of Mary's bereavement. This can be seen in the second chapter when Mary receives a visit from Deacon Quirk. While it is clear that Mary is undergoing a crisis of faith, her belief in God is not in doubt. Rather, the issue is one of resignation to the divine will, and allied with this, an issue of personal and religious integrity. The deacon says to her:

I sympathize with you in this sad dispensation...But it's your duty, as a Christian and a church-member to be resigned."

I tapped the floor with my foot. I began to think that I could not bear much more...

"Deacon Quirk!" said I, "I am not resigned. I pray the dear Lord with all my heart to make me so, but I will not say that I am until I am, if ever that time comes. As for those words about the Lord's will, I would no more take them on my lips than I would blasphemy, unless I could speak them honestly, - and that I cannot do. We had better talk of something else now, had we not?" Deacon Quirk looked at me. It struck me that he would look very much so at a Mormon or a Hottentot, and I wondered whether he was going to excommunicate me on the spot.

As soon as he began to speak, however, I saw that he was only bewildered, - honestly bewildered, and honestly shocked: I do not doubt that I had said bewildering and shocking things.²²

Deacon Quirk's horror is apparent when he looks at her as if she is a 'Mormon or a Hottentot', which suggests that her failure to conform to his version of theology, or accept his authority puts her beyond the pale, outside the realm of civilized society. As with her description of the condolence system, Phelps highlights the inadequacy of social practices in the face of wartime grief. The conversation between Mary and the deacon shows how the glue that holds her community together is based on conformity and convention, whilst emotionally relational ties outside the family are lacking. At

²² Phelps, p.14.

another level, whilst outwardly it is Mary's rebelliousness in the face of conventional doctrine that shocks him, Mary's sudden resemblance to an uncivilized being in his eyes contains a problematic connection with the war itself. The extremity of her emotions and her sense of alienation from theological teaching and social conventions implicitly threaten the social order. She occupies a place beyond the reach of what is civilized and acceptable, and it is the turmoil of the war that has put her there. Mary figures, in a disturbing way, the true effects of the war: alienation, loss, emotional turmoil and a breakdown of all that is 'civilized'. She becomes a scapegoat, saying what is inappropriate, refusing to believe what is asked of her, liable to be excommunicated for her 'rebellious state of mind'. The book brings home, literally, the sense that a byproduct of the war is the need for conformity, and for social discourses and rituals to contain and control the individual's needs and forms of expression for the greater good of the community.

For Phelps, then, this failure of consolation opens up multiple rifts in the social fabric: between emotion and social convention, between grief and the expression of grief, and between theology and personal faith. To return again for a moment to Phelps' description in her autobiography of grief as a 'material miasma', *The Gates Ajar* illustrates the contagious yet unassimilable nature of grief in the aftermath of the war and the lack of available channels of expression which might somehow allow it to circulate within the community, rather than to isolate the bereaved and 'choke the very air' of the more fortunate. Via the character of Mary's aunt, Winifred Forceythe, Phelps explores how these social breaches can be repaired. First and foremost,

Winifred addresses the problem of mourning. Her initial letter is the first example of what, for Mary, is true consolation. As Mary says, ‘She does not use the ugly words “death” and “dying”. I don’t know what exactly she put in their places, but something that had a pleasant sound.’²³ In her letter, Winifred frames her consolation in terms of her own understanding of Mary’s feelings: ‘You have been in all my thoughts, and they have been such pitiful, tender thoughts, that I cannot help letting you know that somebody is sorry for you. For the rest, the heart knoweth its own...’²⁴ This establishes a sense of intense emotional connection and a language of sympathy and knowledge which goes beyond the realm of what can be spoken. Similarly, Winifred’s reference to Roy is brief, stating, ‘I have been thinking how happy you will be by and by because Roy is happy.’²⁵ This frames Mary’s relationship with her dead brother in the present tense and creates a shift, situating Mary, Roy and Winifred herself at different points in an emotional framework that is sustaining and vitally present. At the same time, the letter lays the groundwork for Winifred’s emphasis on emotional connection within a theological framework, and on her emphasis on heaven as a place of re-connection that breaks down the barriers between the living and the dead.

Winifred has a heightened sensitivity to the emotions of those around her. When she mistakenly takes Roy’s empty place at the dinner table on the first day of her stay, she afterwards speaks to Mary about it, saying,

²³ Phelps, p.23.

²⁴ Phelps, p.22.

²⁵ Phelps, p.21.

“...let me sit somewhere else at the breakfast table. if you like. I saw that I had taken ‘the vacant place’. Good night, my dear”.

It was such a little thing! I wonder how many people would have noticed it or taken the trouble to speak of it. The quick perception, the unusual delicacy, - these too are like Roy.²⁶

Again, her sense of intuition and her ability to say the right thing reflect her special connectedness with those around her. This small example of ‘delicacy’ also works to establish her similarity with Roy and so reinforces her role as mediator between Roy and Mary. When Winifred speaks to the servant, Phoebe, Mary notes approvingly that she has taken the trouble to notice the old servant and says, ‘I liked the way...in which it was done. It reminded me of Roy’s fine, well-bred manner towards his inferiors - always cordial, yet always appropriate; I have heard that our mother had much the same’.²⁷ This casts Winifred as a mediator of social order and propriety. As well as this, by invoking the figures of Roy and her mother, Mary is harking back to an antebellum social order. Her dead brother and mother represent a lost way of life, or a way of life that is in decline, and Winifred too is representative of this. The passage is revealing about anxieties over the proper distance between servants and inferiors, and registers the limits of Phelps’ doctrine of connectedness and harmony. We can also see in Mary’s descriptions of Roy’s ‘chivalry’, a nostalgia for a lost social hierarchy, for example in her descriptions of him as a boy pelting her with red blossoms, ‘but with that pretty chivalry of his, which was rare in such a little fellow, which afterwards developed into that rarer treatment of women, of which everyone speaks who speaks of him’.²⁸ Even in the aftermath of the war, Phelps is heavily invested in keeping the

²⁶ Phelps, p.33.

²⁷ Phelps, p.29.

²⁸ Phelps, p.25.

idea of decency and ‘chivalry’ alive. Mary’s memories of Roy always emphasise his ‘manliness’, in contrast to the living men who inhabit the book, such as Dr. Bland the minister, Deacon Quirk, and his son ‘Bin Quirk’ who are slightly comical characters.

Winifred is also presented as having a knowledge of grief, which allows her to empathise with Mary, and she enables Mary to put her grief into words. Most significantly, when they first talk about her loss, Mary is able to weep:

“There,” she said in a low, lulling voice, “now tell Auntie all about it.”
I don’t know what it was, whether the voice, or touch, or words, but it came so suddenly, - and nobody had held me for so long, - that everything seemed to break up and unlock in a minute, and I threw up my hands and cried ... I could tell her – it was not sacrilege – the pent-up story of those weeks. All the time her hand went softly to and fro across my hair.²⁹

Mary’s overwhelming sense of loss becomes more manageable when it finds expression in words and in tears. Telling her grief represents the beginning of the process of mourning and healing that Winifred instigates. The passage also underlines the importance of Winifred as a maternal figure, and bestows authority on her as both mother and comforter. Once again, we can see the emphasis on emotional connection, on the drawing out and sharing of grief, and Winifred and her daughter Faith’s presence in the house transform it from being, as Schnog describes, a ‘depopulated domestic realm’ into a home again.³⁰

²⁹ Phelps, p.36.

³⁰ Schnog, p.135.

Winifred's role as mediator between the social and emotional, and between an antebellum past of imagined social order and harmony and the uncertain and potentially chaotic present, gains added currency because of her special spiritual knowledge which qualifies her for her most important role as mediator between the living and the dead. We can see an example of this when Mary and Winifred go to visit Roy's grave. The occasion offers an opportunity for Winifred to elaborate on her discourse about heaven as a welcoming and consolatory place of rest and to bind together emotional and theological discourse. Phelps employs the site of the graveyard as a place that underlines Winifred's consolatory work. This can be seen, for example, in the opening passage that introduces us to the scene of the graveyard.

We have been over to-night [sic] to the grave. She [Winifred] proposed to go by herself, thinking, I saw, with the delicacy with which she always thinks, that I would rather not be there with another. Nor should I, nor could I, with any other than this woman. It is strange. I wished to go there with her. I had a vague unreasoning feeling that she would take away some of the bitterness of it, as she has taken the bitterness of much else.

It is looking very pleasant there now. The turf has grown fine and smooth. The low, arbor-vitae hedge and knots of Norway spruce that father planted there long ago for mother, drop cool, green shadows that stir with the wind. My English ivy has crept about and about the cross. Roy used to say that he should fancy a cross to mark the spot where he might lie; I think he would like this pure, unveined marble. May-flowers cover the grave now, and steal out among the clover-leaves with a flush like sunrise. By and by there will be roses, and in August, August's own white lilies.

We went silently over and sat down on the grass, the field-path stretching away to the little church behind us, and beyond, in front, the slope, the flats, the river, the hills cut in purple distance, melting far into the east. The air was thick with perfume. Golden bees hung giddily over the blush in the grass. In the low branches that swept the grave a little bird had built her nest.

Aunt Winifred did not speak to me for a time, nor watch my face. Presently she laid her hand upon my lap, and I put mine into it.³¹

³¹ Phelps, pp. 58-59.

Again, Winifred's unusual 'delicacy' is emphasised at the very beginning of the description, signalling a particular emotional register of connection and sympathy as the context to the visit. This continues with Mary's wish to be accompanied by Winifred, rather than going alone, which signals a shift in Mary from isolated mourner to a sharing of grief, albeit in a restricted way that does not at this stage go beyond Winifred. Phelps' description of the grave allows us to see it through Mary's eyes and so draws the reader into a view of the grave that re-configures it from a site of bitterness to one of healing and harmonious regeneration. This process of regeneration is figured, in sensual terms, through the processes of nature. We are introduced to it through the 'pleasantness' of the scene, the 'smoothness and regularity of the turf', indicating a renewed accessibility to the grave itself that echoes Mary's newly awakened sense of ease and the draining away of bitterness. The 'cool, green shadows' of the trees suggest privacy and a retreat into a sheltered, reflective space while the wind that 'stirs' them implies a connection between the grave as private retreat and a larger, unseen divine force. The wind also echoes the sense of natural growth and reproduction represented by the turf and ivy and the roses and lilies. Ultimately, the effect implies dynamic natural and divine forces working in an ordered harmony with each other to provide both physical and emotional growth and regeneration. It is significant that the natural processes of growth that transform the grave into a pastoral sanctuary are also rooted (literally) in the past. The hedge and Norway spruce have both been planted by Mary's father for her mother, which is telling in a number of ways. The site of the grave is situated within the context of family history, suggesting it is the family plot, where (although Phelps does not

explicitly state this) Mary's parents are also buried. This prefigures Winifred's discourse on heaven as a place where reconciliation between those whom death has parted can take place, which she explains as she and Mary sit together in the graveyard. Winifred says of Roy: 'Being *only out of sight*, you remember, not lost, nor asleep, nor annihilated, he goes on loving'.³² In this way, the growth of the sheltering trees planted by her father symbolizes the ever-present and benign dead, who go on loving. Thus the grave becomes a domestic space, the site of maternal and paternal affection, where domestic love and harmony are memorialized and ever-present. It signifies Mary's heritage in an antebellum order and harmony where the values of domestic affection and emotional ties are preserved and nourished by the divinely ordained growth of nature.

As we follow Mary's gaze across the grave there is a sense of being drawn deeper into the scene, through a series of emotionally charged signifiers, until we are confronted with the marker of Roy's grave, a marble cross, which becomes the center of the scene. The cross becomes, as it were, the signifier that holds the system in place, the visible guarantor of meaning that ties together emotional affect and familial and cultural context with spiritual meaning and divine sanction. The English ivy, a plant associated with fidelity, which creeps 'about and about the cross', underlines the binding function of the cross, uniting the growth of nature with Mary's own mourning and with the promise of heavenly sanctuary and reconciliation with the dead. As well as this, the sign of the cross incorporates Mary's suffering (and Roy's) within the context of Christ's suffering before his death, and so bestows divine sanction on her

³² Phelps, p.60.

grief. The 'pure, unveined marble' of the cross gives a sense of holiness and purity and lends it an unearthly quality, as though, like Mary, the reader is being offered a glimpse of a divine realm. The May-flowers, covering the grave, signal the regenerative processes of nature, yet it is a natural order which is carefully emptied of any reference to decay. Instead, the flowers direct us upwards towards the heavens, with their 'flush like sunrise', and similarly the roses that Mary looks forward to seeing are representative of love, (implicitly sacrificial love) while the white lilies, traditionally funereal flowers, represent solemnity and holiness.³³

Mary and Winifred's silence as they walk over to the grave and sit beside it indicates the solemn nature of the occasion and underlines the fact that this is no ordinary visit, but a turning point in Mary's process of mourning and in her spiritual progress. The landscape stretching out before them, 'cut in purple distance melting far into the east', suggests a process of opening out and expansion that reflects Mary's newly awakening sense of emotional liberation and healing. The 'melting' openness in the physical landscape performs the dynamics of emotional connection that Winifred introduces into the process of mourning. This reflects Mary's move from social isolation and a sense of alienation from the 'sunsets that come and go', towards a re-integration into the social world and a re-awakened perception of the divine presence implicit in the harmonious ordering of the natural world. This sense of emotional connection is also implicit in the way in which the intricacies of nature are rendered in affective terms, as in the perfumed air, golden bees and the bird nesting over the

³³ For a contemporary guide to the symbolism of flowers in nineteenth-century American culture, see Lucy Hooper, *The Lady's Book Of Flowers and Poetry*, (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1859).

grave. In this way, she emphasizes the natural world in harmonious, pastoral terms and in doing so superimposes an emotional, consolatory register onto it. This consolatory register is particularly apparent in the way that Phelps emphasizes images of dwelling in nature. Aside from the grave itself as a site that is rooted in parental love and filial affection, the bird in her nest is significant as an image of the home, emphasizing a sense of stability and rootedness. Phelps' descriptions of nature in tactile terms, full of scents and colours operate as a means of re-establishing sensual and emotional ties between the landscape and the mourner. The overall effect suggests the possibility of reconnection with this natural landscape and, through this newly established emotional connection, of inhabiting it once more. The abundance and fecundity of the landscape also holds a promise of regeneration and new growth, again emphasising a process of emotional healing for the grieving female subject, and the healing and regeneration of the society that she inhabits. In describing the natural world in these terms, Phelps is asking her readers to follow Mary's gaze across an unearthly, yet reassuringly 'pleasant' rural landscape that blends the familiar with a glimpse of the afterlife, as though the gates of heaven have indeed momentarily swung ajar.

Throughout the novel, images of nature perform an important function in the way in which Phelps uses them to register Mary's spiritual progress and healing. Early on in the novel, Mary's sense of alienation from nature signals both her grief and a larger sense of discontinuity in the social world. It is significant that just before Mary receives news of Roy's death, she tells us:

The sky was so bright that I could scarcely turn up my eyes to look at it. The sunshine was shivered into little lances all over the glaring white crust. There was a snowbird chirping and pecking on the maple tree as I came in.³⁴

Slightly later in the novel, just before she opens Winifred's letter, she remarks,

I cannot bear to open a letter since that morning when the lances of light fell on the snow.³⁵

Here, nature is unreadable, the sky too bright to look at and 'glaring' on the snow. The 'lances of light' carry both an echo of the war itself in terms of the image of the lance and at the same time suggest a divine will that is hostile and incomprehensible. There is a sense, too, of physical fragmentation in the image of the light that breaks up on the snow, which portends Mary's sense of emotional fragmentation on reading the news of Roy's death, and echoes the physical destructiveness of the war and of Roy's physical self being shattered. The presence of the bird in the maple is also significant because of the way in which Mary associates the tree with Roy. In chapter four of the novel, the maple is particularly significant when Mary describes her alienation at the coming of spring:

The stillness of the May days is creeping into everything; the days in which the furlough was to come and the bitter Peace has come instead, and in which he would have been at home, never to go away from me any more.

The lazy winds are choking me. Their faint sweetness makes me sick. The moist, rich loam is ploughed in the garden; the grass, more golden than green, springs in the warm hollows by the front gate; the great maple, just reaching up to tap at the window, blazes and bows under its weight of scarlet blossoms. I cannot bear their perfume...I hate the bluebirds flashing in and out of the carmine cloud that the maple makes, and singing, singing, everywhere...Most of all I hate the maple. I wish winter were back again to

³⁴ Phelps, p.6.

³⁵ Phelps, p.21.

fold it away in white, with its bare, black fingers only to come tapping at the window. "Roy's maple" we used to call it.³⁶

In contrast with the passage describing Mary's visit to the grave, the coming of spring emphasizes her despair in a way that is bitterly ironic. Spring represents the bitterness of the end of the war and the fact that the peace cannot bring relief in the wake of the war's devastation. As in the passage from Phelps' autobiography, grief is represented in terms of choking, as something that is being breathed in and yet is impossible to absorb. The very 'sweetness' of the wind is sickening as if to imply the cloying sweetness of decay. This is echoed in the 'weight of scarlet blossoms', on the maple and their unbearable perfume, as though Roy's favourite tree has become a symbol of the shedding of his blood. The ploughed fertile land and singing birds imply a relentless physical process of growth and regeneration that Mary cannot partake of. Winter itself figures emotional trauma, both in the earlier description of the snow as 'a glaring white crust' which covers everything and makes emotional connection impossible, and in the image of winter as 'enfolding' and numbing, and thereby providing a form of consolation that forbids connection and instead drives her deeper into herself.

This sense of numbness can also be seen in her initial reaction to the news of Roy's death and to his body when it is brought home:

If I could have gone to him, could have busied myself with packing and journeying, could have forced myself to think and plan, could have had the shadow of a hope of one more look, one word, I suppose I should have taken it differently. Those two words – "Shot dead" – shut me up and walled me in, as

³⁶ Phelps, pp 24-25.

I think people must feel shut up and walled in, in Hell. I write the words most solemnly, for I know there has been Hell in my heart.

It is all over now. He came back, and they brought him up the steps, and I listened to their feet, - so many feet; he used to come bounding in. They let me see him for a minute, and there was a funeral, and Mrs Bland came over, and she and Phoebe attended to everything, I suppose. I did not notice nor think till we had left him in the cold and had come back. The windows of his room were opened, and the bitter wind swept in. The house was still and damp. Nobody was there to welcome me. Nobody would ever be...³⁷

By emphasising the sudden shock of Roy's death and Mary's lack of preparedness, Phelps is articulating the helplessness of the relatives of those killed in battle. Mary is actually fortunate even to have a body to bury.³⁸

When Roy's body is brought back, the women, Mrs Bland and Phoebe, 'attend to' the laying out. Phelps' description reflects the way in which the practical aspects of attending to the corpse are done customarily by women, as part of the process of tending the dying body and witnessing the death of the loved one. Yet here, crucial aspects of this process are missing. The moment of death is absent, elsewhere, as is the affect relating to the death. Mary is in a state of shock, where she does not 'notice' or 'think' about the body itself, or associate it with Roy. Phelps is careful not to dwell on the scene of witnessing Roy's body, or describe the condition of the corpse. The physical horror of the war is not explicitly referred to in the novel, yet this is not because Phelps merely wished to gloss over it. Rather it is because she was all too

³⁷ Phelps, p.7.

³⁸ Over six hundred thousand Americans died in the Civil War and the chaos of the war, coupled with the fact that so many corpses were dismembered, ensured that few bodies were returned home to be interred. Thousands of unknown soldiers were buried in the South and it is estimated that about quarter of a million were never buried at all. In addition to the number of dead, half a million men were wounded and over thirty thousand amputations were performed, causing tales to circulate of piles of arms and legs left lying outside hospitals. All this disrupted the nineteenth-century culture of death, which placed great emphasis on tending the body of the dying, witnessing the moment of death, gathering keepsakes and envisioning the loved one in heaven. See Long, pp.785-786.

aware of the horror of the war, and was attempting to offer comfort and assuage the suffering of the bereaved. In fact, the physical carnage of the war is ever-present in the background of the novel, and as Long argues, is a crucial, motivational force behind Phelps' project of finding a means of envisioning a material and spiritual heaven. As Long points out, '[d]ead bodies are "rehabilitated" in *The Gates Ajar* in the sense that they are "re-clothed" in heaven in ideal earthly forms... Bodily rehabilitation is even more necessary in times of war, when precious human bodies are so vulnerable, so cheap.'³⁹ As was the case for so many mourners reading Phelps' novel. Roy's death deprives Mary not just of a loved one, but of the chance to say goodbye and even to be able to imagine his death. The 'hope of one more look, one more word' implies that a final deathbed scene would have enabled her to place the death of her brother within a recognizable frame of reference, whereby the dead could be memorialized with keepsakes, their final words can be cherished and they can be visualized in heaven. We are told later in the novel that Mary did receive a letter from Roy shortly before he died, where he spoke about his, 'dawning sense of friendship with Christ' and offers her reassurance of his Christian faith.⁴⁰ Yet as with the very fact of Mary at least having a corpse to bury, receiving such a letter is a peculiarly fortunate event, given the chaotic circumstances of the war and the unlikeliness of soldiers at the front line having the opportunity either to reflect on at length or to express with any eloquence a sense of friendship with Christ. Roy's belief is used as a means of offering comfort to the reader by emphasising the redemptive power of faith, and the fact that the dead loved one is, as Roy puts it, 'bought with a price'. It is significant that Roy refers to

³⁹ Long, p.788.

⁴⁰ Phelps, p.15.

Christ's sacrifice in his letter. Christ on the cross alludes to the idea of sacrificial death and is echoed in Roy's own sacrifice of his life. In this way, Phelps situates the death of the soldier in battle within the framework of Christian belief, and provides the reassurance that Roy himself is resigned to his death and assured of access to heaven.

Roy's letter functions as a keepsake, which compensates for the absence of a final deathbed scene. His profession of faith is crucial as consolation because it allows Mary, and by extension the bereaved reader, to envision the lost loved one in heaven and to give meaning to death in battle within the framework of Christ's loving sacrifice for humanity. Yet Roy's words alone are not sufficient at this stage, to provide consolation. Mary's reaction to the news of his death is striking for the way in which it immediately isolates her. She is shut up and walled in, as though in hell. The language that describes her reaction evokes a sense of both spiritual and emotional crisis. This moment of trauma, which cuts her off from connection with others, is heightened by the impersonal way in which the body is brought back to the house. Whilst clearly others are present, and the body itself is attended to, there is no support system in place to offer consolation and this is underlined by Mary's return to the empty house. The presence of Phoebe, the elderly servant, means that Mary is not left entirely alone, but Phoebe's status as servant limits her ability to console.

II

‘Bought With a Price’: The Economy of Divine Love.

Allied with the problem of the failure of the social condolence system to provide support or consolation is the failure of the religious establishment to offer support or a framework in which Mary can accept Roy's death. As we saw earlier, Deacon Quirk is only able to speak about loss in terms of resignation, and he views Mary's grief as dangerously rebellious. A more crucial aspect of the inadequacy of his theological doctrine is the fact that, unlike Winifred's teaching, it fails to heal the gap between the living and the dead. Quirk says to Mary that,

“...if he [Royal] is singing the song of Moses and the Lamb (he pointed with his big dingy thumb at the ceiling), *he* dosen't rebel against the doings of Providence. All *his* affections are subdued to God, - merged, as you might say, - merged in worshipping before the great White Throne. He dosen't think this miser'ble earthly spere [sic] of any importance, compared with that eternal and exceeding weight of glory...” Can the man in any state of existence be made to comprehend that he has been holding me on the rack this whole evening?

Yet he came under a strict sense of duty, and in the kindness of all the heart he has!...But it hurts - it cuts - that thing which he said as he went out; because it must be true; because it seems to me greater than I can bear to have it true.

Roy away in that dreadful Heaven, can have no thought of me, cannot remember how I loved him, how he left me all alone. The singing and worshipping must take up all his time. God wants it all. He is a ‘Jealous God’. I am nothing any more to Roy.⁴¹

⁴¹ Phelps, pp.16-17.

Deacon Quirk's version of heaven gives no account of either physicality or emotion. Heaven is figured as a state that is lacking in affect, where the inhabitants are 'subdued' and 'merged' with God. In this heaven, while all marks of suffering in 'this miserable earthly spere' are erased, there is also no place for any lingering traces of affection or memory that would connect the dead with the living. His insistence on heaven as a place where emotions are merged and subdued into a uniform act of worship, offers a model to the bereaved of unquestioning acceptance of death and demands that all claims on the dead are renounced. This impersonal vision of heaven corresponds to what Long describes as '[t]he impersonal and disembodied national narrative of wartime death',⁴² whereby both the suffering physical body of the soldier and the grief of the bereaved are subsumed to the rhetoric of the national wartime mission. Mary, far from being reconciled by Deacon Quirk's argument, experiences it as a form of torture that assaults her both physically and emotionally.

In contrast, Winifred combines emotional consolation with a theological doctrine of spiritual embodiment which recuperates Roy's lost physical self and the relational ties severed by death. Thus Winifred promises Mary that although Roy is an angel, he is also

"...not any the less Roy for that, - not any the less your own real Roy, who will love you and wait for you and be very glad to see you, as he used to love and wait and be glad when you came home from a journey on a cold winter night".⁴³

⁴² Long, p.794

⁴³ Phelps, p.38.

Long argues that the idea of spiritual embodiment operates therapeutically and as a means of registering the cultural anxieties opened up by the war. She comments that

[p]ersonal loss, religious disillusionment, and a growing skepticism about the national mission are experienced as and expressed through...the jangled nerves of Phelps' grieving protagonist...the repression of individual desire and the self-sacrifice required of soldiers and civilians during the Civil War produced a "vacant place" that can be recuperated only through the spiritual "rehabilitation" of distinctive bodies.⁴⁴

She also points out that, 'Phelps' embodied heaven is not an empty promise, as the Civil War proved to be for most Americans, but a reality, a material reward befitting the material sacrifices of those remaining on earth'.⁴⁵ This comment about the need for a (very unorthodox) material form of consolation to offset the very tangible sacrifices and losses inflicted by the war offers a useful way of understanding the importance of an embodied heaven for Phelps and her readers. Crucially, Winifred transforms loss into sacrifice and sacrifice into an act of ongoing divine love through her concept of a material heaven. We can see this idea beginning to emerge even before Winifred arrives on the scene, when Mary talks about Roy's letter in which he refers to his sense of being 'bought with a price'.⁴⁶ At this point, the letter alone is not enough to console Mary for Roy's death, yet, as mentioned earlier, it functions as a keepsake, offering in material form the seeds of consolation which will develop under Winifred's tutelage. The letter operates both as a physical trace of Roy's presence and to prefigure Winifred's teaching about loving sacrifice, so that both Roy's presence and Winifred's doctrine converge in the letter.

⁴⁴ Long, p.782.

⁴⁵ Long, p.791.

⁴⁶ Phelps, p.15.

Mary's task, as it unfolds in the novel is that of learning how to 'read' the letter in a way that will allow her to transform tangible, emotional loss into sacrifice, and sacrifice into loving emotional and physical presence. The idea of the keepsake is particularly useful in terms of understanding the way in which a material heaven functions as consolation. As Joanne Dobson argues, the keepsake, or sentimental artifact, was a 'potent and multivalenced remembrance, a material object upon which was played out symbolically an all-too-intimate acquaintance with the tragic evanescence of human life'.⁴⁷ The keepsake, as a material inscription of the dead, provides a foundation for Winifred's embodied heaven where the physical presence of the dead loved one is recuperated. Whilst speculating on the nature of heaven, Mary asks Winifred 'yet you believe that *something* belonging to this body is preserved for the completion of another?' Winifred replies that,

"...for aught we know, some invisible compound of an annihilated body may hover, by a divine decree, around the site of death till it is wanted, - sufficient to preserve identity as strictly as a body can ever be said to preserve it; and stranger things have happened. You remember the old Mohammedan belief in the one little bone which is imperishable. Prof. Bush's idea of our triune existence is suggestive for a notion. He believed, you know, that it takes a material body, a spiritual body, and a soul, to make a man. The spiritual body is enclosed within the material, the soul within the spiritual. Death is simply the slipping off of the outer body as a husk slips off from its kernel. The deathless frame stands ready then for the soul's untrammelled occupation. But it is a waste of time to speculate over such useless fancies, while so many remain that will vitally affect our happiness".⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Joanne Dobson, 'Reclaiming Sentimental Literature', *American Literature*, 69, (1997), 263-288, p.274.

⁴⁸ Phelps, pp.78-79.

Winifred speaks in a dismissive tone about the importance of the discussion, yet the question of recuperating the annihilated body was agonizingly serious for Phelps' readers. Winifred's apparent lack of earnestness in these speculations stages the mechanics of bodily recuperation as being of little importance. In this way, death becomes detached from the actuality of physical disintegration. Her tone suggests that it is a minor matter which God has taken care of, and death (and implicitly violent death in battle) becomes the physical means to a spiritual end, a mere 'slipping off' from the physical kernel. Beneath the surface of this discussion lurk the fragmented physical bodies of those lost in battle and the danger of an equally fragmented and irrecoverable identity. Via Winifred, Phelps' apparently artless downplaying of the importance of the physical body and the ease with which it can be recuperated into spiritual wholeness, directs her readers' attention away from the horror of violent death and attends to the anxiety of recovering and preserving the selfhood and identity of the dead, thereby offering consolation to the bereaved. Thus, without apparently addressing it in any serious way, Phelps offers consolation with the idea that even 'one little bone' may be 'imperishable', and so implies that however lost and fragmented the body may be, a single part of it may be enough to preserve intact the identity of the dead. Here the dynamics of the keepsake come into play, offering the body as an indelible trace of spiritual immortality and allowing the mourner to read into it a promise of a rehabilitated 'identity' that is projected beyond the finality of death.

Roy's comment about being 'bought with a price' is also significant in terms of Winifred's teaching about Christ as a sacrificial figure. The importance of Christ rests in his humanity. As Winifred says at one point,

"In our recoil from the materialism of the Romish Church [i.e. the resurrection of the body] we have, it seems to me, nearly stranded ourselves on the opposite shore. Just as, in a rebound from the spirit which would put our Saviour on a level with Buddha or Mahomet, we have been in danger of forgetting 'to begin as the Bible begins', with his humanity".⁴⁹

The idea of an embodied Christ rescues the idea of divine love from the abstraction of Deacon Quirk's and Dr. Bland's doctrine of heaven, and places Roy's death within a framework of loving exchange. Winifred points out to Mary that "Roy's God loves you more than Roy does."⁵⁰ Her emphasis on Christ as representative of divine sacrifice for humanity thus offers a model of a tangible divine love. The divine plan, rather than being an inscrutable abstraction, becomes an economic system, one based on exchange. The physical body is transformed into divine currency, its very erasure operating as the 'price' that guarantees a secure heavenly investment. At a later point in the novel, Winifred elaborates further on this divine system

"...it seems to me like this: A friend goes away from us, and it may be seas or worlds that lie between us, and we love him. He leaves behind him his little keepsakes; a lock of hair to curl about our fingers; a picture that has caught the trick of his eyes or smile; a book, a flower, a letter. What we do with the curling hair, what we say to the picture, what we dream over the flower or letter, nobody knows but ourselves. People have risked life for such mementos. Yet who loves the senseless gift more than the giver, - the curl more than the young forehead on which it fell, the letter more than the hand which traced it?

⁴⁹ Phelps, p.75.

⁵⁰ Phelps, p.37.

So it seems to me that we shall learn to see in God the center of all possibilities of joy. The greatest of these lesser delights is but the greater measure of his friendship. They will not mean less of pleasure, but more of Him. They will not 'pale', as Dr. Bland would say. Human dearness will wax, not wane, in heaven; but human friends will be loved for love of him..."⁵¹

Here, Roy himself becomes transformed into a keepsake of divine love and divine presence. The material traces of his existence form part of an associative network which calls up not only Roy's ongoing and materialized spiritual being, but also the presence of God. As Winifred is at pains to illustrate, the value resides not in the 'senseless gift', but in the giver. Whilst the keepsake left behind by the loved one retains its emotional value, the object is significant through its power to call up, by association, the presence of the giver. Quirk's account of the transformation from the earthly condition to a heavenly one represents heaven in metaphoric terms as 'worshipping before the great white throne' - terms which characterize heaven as a state of submission to divine sovereignty, separate from and superior to earthly life.

In his discussion of poetic form in relation to Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Ed Cutler notes that, 'Metaphor requires separateness as a linguistic precondition, insofar as metaphorical meaning is produced in the articulation of a similarity between disparate terms...while metonymic discourse stresses "combination and contexture."⁵² Quirk's account of heaven relies on metaphoric substitution and so stresses the separateness of heaven from earth, the terms of spiritual existence becoming, as it were, a substitute for the earthly sphere. In contrast, Winifred's emphasis on the keepsake as a model of divine love articulates heaven in metonymic terms, which

⁵¹ Phelps, p.131.

⁵² See Ed Cutler, 'Passage to Modernity: *Leaves of Grass* and the 1853 Crystal Palace Exhibition in New York', *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, 16.2, (1998), 65-89, p.77.

draw heaven and earth together and express them as constituent parts of the same divine totality. Transcendent divine love is represented through a metonymy that forges emotional connections between earth and heaven, and between the living and the dead. Divine presence resides in and is expressed through the relational ties between the living and the dead loved one, rather than residing in a separate heavenly sphere based on a hierarchical power structure. Roy's absence, therefore, does not signal erasure, but rather positions him within this metonymic system. This economy of divine love allows for substitution and exchange yet ensures that the dead retain an enduring divine value. In this way, physical bodies and things become inscribed with a trace of the spiritual, and earth and heaven are transformed from mutually exclusive realms situated on either side of an irrevocable boundary into being equivalent positions circulating within the same system. With Winifred as her guide, Mary learns to become a competent investor who knowingly manipulates this economy, rather than a victim of Quirk's 'miserable earthly spere'. The 'price' of this, as it were, is the deferral of gratification; the reward is the consolation of inscribing the material world with the indelible traces of heaven and divine presence.

This economy of exchange and substitution not only makes the spiritual comprehensible within a material framework but also offers a model for re-inscribing and redistributing an otherwise unmanageable burden of affect. For Phelps, the keepsake offers pleasure because it retains its emotional charge and symbolizes the power of affective ties beyond death whilst simultaneously inscribing that affect within a manageable system of association and deferral. This spiritual economy

performs the emotional work of allowing affect to circulate and to become re-integrated into society. Phelps' economy of heavenly love thus becomes a means of creating an economy of grief, whereby the 'material miasma' that she describes in her autobiography, can be allowed to circulate and become assimilated into the social fabric.

III

'Think of God and Heaven': Consolation and Disciplinary Intimacy.

Winifred's death from cancer in the final chapter of the novel allows her teaching on death and the nature of heaven to be played out, in a final and climactic scene of mourning. As Long notes, Winifred's physical frailty 'gives her the conventional foreknowledge of heaven so often bestowed upon the ill and the dying'.⁵³ Her final deathbed scene resonates with those of characters like Alice Humphreys in Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World* and, most notoriously, the death of little Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The weight of this convention gives added force to her role as spiritual guide, and becomes an end-point for grief in the novel. Her death represents the logical conclusion to her teachings about heaven, as though, having been the instrument through which Mary can learn to grieve, and a means of mediating grief for the community, Winifred must become a messenger between earth and the afterlife.

⁵³ Long, p.791.

Winifred's death is also important because it allows Mary to step into her role. She tells us in the final paragraph of the novel that,

...we are waiting for the morning when the gates shall open, - Faith and I. I from my stiller watches, am not saddened by the music of her life. I feel sure that her mother wishes it to be a cheery life. I feel sure she is showing me, who will have no motherhood by which to show myself, how to help her little girl.

And Roy, -ah, well, and Roy, - he knows. Our hour is not yet come. If the Master will that we should be about His Father's business. what is that to us?⁵⁴

As with Winifred, the role of mourner and mother converge in the care of the child Faith, and by the end, Mary becomes both mother and mourner. At one level, Mary, as a single woman without the prospect of marriage, is integrated into society through her role as a substitute mother for Faith. At another level, the role of mother signals Mary's maturity and her coming of age in emotional and spiritual terms. Like her aunt, Mary is now positioned in close relationship to the dead, sure that Winifred is showing her how to bring up Faith, and that Roy also 'knows' her role and watches approvingly. This resolution represents Phelps' attempt at closure in relation to grief and postbellum society. Loss is reconfigured into the presence of dead loved ones, and heaven becomes a site of stability and security that compensates for absence and uncertainty in the postwar world.

Nancy Schnog concludes her reading of *The Gates Ajar* by asserting that the novel creates a therapeutically liberating imaginative space for the grieving female

⁵⁴ Phelps, p.162.

subject. She argues that the idea of an embodied and Utopian heaven becomes an imaginative force that recuperates female pleasure and emotion from the alienating abstraction of Calvinist theology.⁵⁵ She also differentiates *The Gates Ajar* from earlier novels such as Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, arguing that Phelps resists the doctrine of self-denial that Warner imposes on her heroine. Schnog points out perceptively that in Warner's novel, imaginative reunion between the young protagonist, Ellen, and her mother is premised on,

...the demand of Ellen's self discipline: for to be like her mother meant submitting herself, her will and desires to the dominant authority of evangelical religion and patriarchal society. Contrarily... Phelps uproots and rejects precisely those forms of female de-selfing that operated through internal self-discipline and the sacrifice of personal desire... Winifred's teachings reassemble female experience along an axis of personal desire. A form of psychoemotional permissiveness unimaginable to Susan Warner, Phelps' recuperative technique rewrites the psychic ground of social action as an internal allegiance to an imagined world of individual wants...⁵⁶

Undeniably, *The Gates Ajar* presents a challenge to conventional religious authority that no doubt would have been unimaginable to Susan Warner. One need look no further than Phelps' own account of the novel's reception to see the stir that it caused, and the extent to which Winifred's re-embodied heaven was both radical and disturbing for the religious establishment. Yet the problem of 'emotional self-

⁵⁵ Schnog argues that, '[u]ltimately, Winifred's recuperative strategy provides Mary with the tools to overcome and manage the emotional consequences of Roy's death...Unable to control the force of her suffering at the novel's beginning, Mary, by the novel's end has learned to use Winifred's imaginative tactics to achieve what others in her culture were apparently managing through other means: the containment and denial of the magnitude of grief... Displacing the inner psychological turf – the emotional subjugation and self-discipline – at the core of genteel and Calvinist mourning practices, Winifred's theology authorizes in its place the psychic pleasures gained through imaginative license and the expression of personal desire'. Schnog, pp.147-148.

⁵⁶ Schnog, p.147

discipline' in relation to female subjectivity does not, I would argue, disappear quite as straightforwardly as Schnog would have us believe. While the character of Winifred represents a mouthpiece for Phelps' rewriting of conventional religious doctrine, and a therapeutic strategy that allows grief to be openly spoken, the consolation that Winifred offers is not as liberating or unproblematic as it seems when considered in relation to 'personal desire' and the female subject. Viewed one way, the importance of Winifred lies in the fact that she does not dismiss female desire, and part of the book's massive popular appeal is derived from the way in which the female characters do indeed get exactly what they are shown to want (a secure home on earth and the certainty of a place in heaven). Yet while this satisfying and consoling resolution does not demand the sacrifice of desire, it does demand a specific scripting of it. In the novel, mourning converges with desire and in doing so structures female subjectivity in a way that is uncannily similar to the antebellum 'disciplinary' tactics of Warner and Stowe. We can see this most clearly when Phelps' model of mourning demands a disavowal of the more disturbing and potentially subversive aspects of grief.

A striking example of this occurs in relation to a poem that Mary copies out in her journal early on in the novel, before Winifred's arrival:⁵⁷

Be calm, my child, forget thy woe,
And think of God and Heaven;
Christ thy Redeemer hath to thee
Himself for comfort given.

⁵⁷ I have so far been unable to identify the origin of this poem. Mary Louise Kete mentions it in her discussion of Phelps and identifies it as the work of an 'unnamed German Romantic poet.' See Mary Louise Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations, Mourning and Middle-Class Identity in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000) p.97.

“O mother, mother, what is Heaven?
 O mother, what is Hell?
 To be with Wilhelm - that's my Heaven?
 Without him - that's my Hell.”⁵⁸

When Mary shows her these words in her journal, they have a very strong effect on Winifred:

As I was looking over the green book last night, Aunt Winifred came up behind me and softly laid a bunch of violets down between the leaves.

By an odd contrast, the contented, passionless things fell against those two verses that were copied from the German, and completely covered them from sight. I lifted the flowers and held the page for her to see.

As she read, her face altered strangely; her eyes dilated, her lip quivered, a flush shot over her cheeks and dyed her forehead up to the waves of her hair. I turned away quickly, feeling that I had committed a rudeness in watching her, and detecting in her, however involuntarily, some far, inner sympathy, or shadow of a long-past sympathy, with the desperate words. “Mary”, she said, laying down the book. “I believe Satan wrote that.” She laughed a little then, nervously, and paled back into her quiet, peaceful self. “I mean that he inspired it. They are wicked words. You must not read them over. You will outgrow them some time with a beautiful sympathy of trust and love. Let them alone till that time comes. See, I will blot them out of sight for you with colors as blue as heaven, - the real heaven, where God *will* be loved the most.”

She shook apart the thick, sweet nosegay, and, taking a half-dozen of the little blossoms, pinned them, dripping with fragrant dew, upon the lines. There I shall let them stay, and since she wishes it, I shall not lift them to see the reckless words till I can do it safely.⁵⁹

The poem is an encryption that reads both with the novel and against it. The dialogue between two speakers (the first speaker a mother and the second speaker her daughter) prefigures the dialogue between Winifred and Mary. Like Winifred, the mother espouses a model of mourning which offers the consolations of ‘God and Heaven’ in

⁵⁸ Phelps, p.11.

⁵⁹ Phelps, p.42.

exchange for the young girl relinquishing her lover and substituting Christ as the object of her affections. Yet here, the young speaker subverts that message and refuses to allow her loss to be contained within a religious framework. Resisting the mother's religious doctrine, the second speaker transforms it into social relations, equating heaven and hell with the physical presence and absence of the lover. Instead of being the endpoint of the speaker's desire, the spiritual becomes instead a means of registering her emotional state. Although she cannot express her grief in terms that go beyond those of heaven and hell, the speaker's refusal to allow the spiritual to transcend the material constitutes a refusal to accept a divinely structured ordering of things and a refusal to compromise her own desire. This rejection of theological doctrine offers a glimpse of a much more unstable but potentially liberating worldview. No longer sheltered by the consolations of 'God and Heaven', disobeying her mother and questioning the securities of an earlier generation, the young speaker resists the coerciveness of her mother's creed and the disciplinary force of sentimental consolation.

It is surprising to find such a subversive poem in *The Gates Ajar*, and indeed the purpose of including it seems to be so that it can be unequivocally forbidden by Winifred. The poem certainly carries all the force of Mary's despair and her fear that, 'God wants it all. He is a "Jealous God"'.⁶⁰ Even in Winifred, Mary detects 'some far, inner sympathy...with the desperate words'. Despair and 'desperate words' present a form of reckless, passionate emotion that refuses to be contained by Winifred's theology. The poem has a noticeable physical effect on Winifred. Her

⁶⁰ Phelps, p.17.

reaction to it is described in sensual terms, ‘her eyes dilated, her lip quivered, a flush shot over her cheeks and dyed her forehead up to the waves of her hair...’ The ‘contented, passionless’ violets also contrast with Winifred’s sudden reaction, and with the emotional charge of the poem itself. ‘Passionless’ is a particularly loaded word here, not just in relation to anger (which appears at least partly to be the cause of Winifred’s flushing, and which she quickly suppresses), but also because it has connotations of the submissive and passionless woman of Victorian sexual ideology. The poem is threatening to Winifred, not just because despair threatens to undo religious doctrine but also because the poem speaks subversively of sexual desire in a way that refuses to sublimate it into spiritual terms. Flowers, often used in the nineteenth century to represent femininity, are particularly significant here. The ‘contented, passionless’ flowers, ‘dripping with fragrant dew’, and Winifred’s emphasis on the ‘wickedness’ of the poem’s message which must be replaced by ‘the *real* heaven, where God *will* be loved the most...’ are a coded lesson not only about grief but about the proper nature of womanhood. In this way, Phelps uses the ideology of ‘True Womanhood’ as a means of containing grief when it threatens to disrupt the framework of religious faith and the boundaries of gender.

It is noticeable, however, that Phelps makes Winifred react ‘involuntarily’ with sympathy to the poem, as though she does not merely feel sympathy for, but actually feels, however involuntarily, the despair and desire evoked in the poem. At a stroke, Phelps acknowledges grief in its most subversive form and disavows it. The flowers, a loaded image of femininity, are pinned onto the page, blotting out the

potentially dangerous expression of loss that lurks beneath. Presumably Winifred could have requested that Mary tear the page out and burn it, but she does not. Pinning the flowers over it, so that it is hidden but not erased is revealing about the way in which Winifred's model of femininity and mourning is superimposed over the disavowed, unacceptable aspects of grief that nonetheless remain hidden underneath.

Although much of the criticism on *The Gates Ajar*, (Schnog in particular) has emphasized her therapeutic role in allowing Mary to grieve openly, there has been no discussion of Winifred's disciplinary role. The image of the flowers pinned over the poem points revealingly towards the constructed nature of mourning in the novel. It is not enough, in other words, simply to feel. Certain forms of feeling are dangerous, they have to be hidden, or re-shaped into a form that can be contained within the religious doctrine that Winifred practices. Whilst Winifred's theology, as we have seen, does not simply deny grief, her teaching is dependent on containing grief within the bounds of 'faith' and within the bounds of True Womanhood. Indeed, it is significant that when Mary presents her grief to Winifred in a potentially subversive form, Winifred in turn, evokes a classic antebellum model of 'passionless' womanhood as a means of containing grief and showing her the proper way to mourn.

If passionlessness rears its head at the moment when grief threatens to become transgressive, Phelps also acknowledges that desire and despair do not simply go away. Since Winifred wishes it, Mary tells us, she will not lift the flowers from the words, 'till I can do it safely'. Why, we might ask, would Mary want to look at such

dangerous words again? And under what conditions would it become safe for her to do so? Even when the words are covered over, Mary envisages a return to them and clearly it is not enough simply to blot them out. The poem expresses despair, rebellion against the older generation, sexual passion, religious doubt - in other words, all the things that go against the grain of Winifred's teaching, yet Phelps is tacitly acknowledging that these are too compelling and visceral to simply vanish. It is telling that she incorporates the poem into the framework of grief in the postbellum world and that the sentiments it expresses, however wicked, are nonetheless acknowledged as a component of the protagonist's grief. Winifred's treatment of the poem is significant, then, not only because it underlines the subversive potential of grief but also because the incident highlights the disciplinary forces at work in the novel. Mary's trajectory in the course of the text is her transformation from a grieving female reader who, within the terms of the novel, is dangerously naïve, into a fully-fledged mourner who has 'outgrown' the poem and learned to 'love God the most'. The whole point of including such a subversive expression of grief is to demonstrate the disciplinary work that must operate on it. For Phelps, the act of blotting out the poem is the most important aspect of its inclusion in the novel. It is there so that its suppression can supply a moral lesson that explicitly expunges the poem from the model of mourning that Phelps wants to make available to her readers.

We can see another example of the way in which Winifred puts the consoling power of her teaching to disciplinary effect a little later in the novel, at a point when Mary has been bearing her grief 'very badly all day'. Still shunning

contact with outsiders, Mary does not want to go downstairs to face Mrs. Bland who has come to call on her. Winifred reminds Mary that,

“You know you never thanked her for those English violets that she sent the other day. I only thought I would remind you; she might feel a little pained.” “I can’t tonight, - not tonight, Aunt Winifred. You must excuse me to her somehow. I don’t want to go down.” “Is it that you don’t ‘want to’, or is it that you can’t?” she said, in that gentle, motherly way of hers, at which I can never take offence. “Mary I wonder if Roy would not a little rather that you would go down?” It might have been Roy himself who spoke. I went down.⁶¹

Winifred’s tone throughout is that of a ‘gentle, motherly’ reminder, and the dynamic between them is of a mother reprimanding a child. The emphasis on sacrificing personal wants to spare another’s feelings resembles the ‘other-centredness’ characteristic of what Richard Brodhead terms ‘disciplinary intimacy’ or ‘love-power’. Its force comes from an internalised moral imperative implanted in the subject through an intensified emotional bond with an authority figure. Differentiating it from a Foucauldian model of social relations where authority resides in persons, Brodhead argues that a primary feature of this disciplinary authority is that it requires authority to put on a human face. It also consists of a ‘purposeful sentimentalization’ of the disciplinary relation, which involves

... a strategic relocation of authorities in the realm of emotion. and a conscious intensification of the emotional bond between the authority figure and its charge... this ideally intentioned *love-power* has the effect of holding – indeed of virtually enclosing the subject in a field of projected feeling... as it enfolds the child in its love, this mode of authority knowingly aims to awaken a reciprocal strength of love and to fix that love back on itself.⁶²

⁶¹ Phelps, pp 72-73.

⁶² Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp.19-20.

Taking Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* as a classic instance of this, Brodhead goes on to point out that the crisis of separation between Ellen and her mother at the beginning of the novel dramatises the fact that oneness with the mother is something that one cannot *not* lose. He argues that

[w]hat the plot of the novel shows is how an acculturation system like Ellen's makes this newly intensified grief of separation a psychic resource for disciplining the subject. In [Warner's novel], to love one's mother is to wish to do things her way, but to love her and lose her is to have this wish heightened to a full-fledged moral imperative.⁶³

The way in which this 'love-power' operates to disciplinary effect is exemplified by the exchange between Winifred and Mary over Mrs. Bland's visit. Winifred uses Mary's reluctance to face Mrs. Bland as a means of delivering another coded lesson about feminine behaviour: in this case the moral imperative of selflessness and the necessity of sparing the feelings of others in the face of one's own grief. It is significant that the ubiquitous flowers turn up here again, their presence underlining the gendered performance of feeling in polite society. Winifred's admonition is spoken in a tone of understated politeness and gentleness. It is impossible, Mary tells us, to take offence; yet the gentleness of the tone is a measure of its disciplinary efficacy. That Winifred can exact obedience from Mary with such a mild reproof is a measure of the strength of her internal hold over her.

The 'intensified emotional bond', to use Brodhead's term, which exists between Winifred and Mary operates to disciplinary effect at several levels. In Winifred's doctrine of heaven where the dead are re-embodied and go on loving, the

⁶³ Brodhead, p.34.

absent dead are in fact no longer absent but invisibly present and always watching. Thus Winifred's reprimand carries the force of what Roy himself wants Mary to do. As we have seen, heaven, formerly an abstract and impersonal concept for Mary, becomes humanized through Winifred's teachings, and relocated in the realm of emotional ties and personal relationships. This may not sound all that dissimilar from the dynamics of the poem quoted above, yet unlike the first speaker in the poem, Winifred does not counsel that Mary forget her 'woe' in order to think of 'God and Heaven', but rather that she use grief as the driving force which will transform heaven and ultimately God into the focus of her desire. The intensity of her sense of loss is transferred onto Winifred in her role as comforter and earthly representative of those already in heaven. She becomes as it were both initiator and mediator of the disciplinary force that inheres in the relations between absence and presence. Rather than something to be denied, as it is for Deacon Quirk, grief for Winifred is an invaluable psychic resource for disciplining and transforming the subject. Yet this is not to suggest that Winifred deliberately sets out with the intention of shaping Mary in a particular way. Or rather, the purpose of Phelps' novel is not to discipline her readers but to console them with the message that the dead are not lost and that emotional ties with them can be resumed in heaven. The byproduct of this, however, is that mourning comes to perform a peculiarly disciplinary action on the female subject.

Schnog and Brodhead's accounts of how feeling operates in relation to discipline lie at different ends of a spectrum. It is only by taking these apparently contradictory arguments into account that we can appreciate fully how mourning is

constructed in *The Gates Ajar*. For the importance of Winifred lies in the way that she offers a point of intersection between emotion and disciplinary structures. Compelling as it may be, Schnog's account of Winifred's model of mourning as a liberating strategy of emotional expressiveness does not allow for the importance of religion as a framework which structures and contains affect in the novel. Brodhead's argument, while offering a useful way of understanding how feeling operates as a disciplinary force in the text, gives us only one half of the story. It does not, in other words, address the question of how disciplinary structures themselves are revised in relation to feeling.

Winifred's repression of the poem is surprising when we consider that she is on the side of feeling and emotional expression. Yet the poem is threatening precisely because it represents an extreme of emotional expression. The affect expressed in the poem becomes excess in the terms of the novel: excess that overrides boundaries of feeling and threatens to dismantle religious and social structures. Whilst speaking for feeling in the novel and performing a therapeutic function in relation to the expression of grief, Winifred clearly is not out to dismantle social structures. The heaven she espouses is a conservative representation of earthly society and her challenge to the theological establishment is framed by the 'Christ-like toiling'⁶⁴ of missionary work, her wifely submission to the authority of her dead and saintly husband and her embodiment of the ideal of the True Woman. Her role is that of finding a middle-ground that channels and stabilises feeling and allows it to be expressed in such a way that that it does not overload the social and theological

⁶⁴ Phelps, p.43.

systems. At the same time the religious establishment and social attitudes to grief have to be altered in such a way that they can be infused with feeling and offer the possibility of articulating grief in the wake of the war. A means must be found, in other words that will allow people to feel and to grieve rather than simply to repress their loss. At the same time, feeling has to be mediated, contained, structured so that it does not overwhelm the suddenly fragile and traumatized post-war society.

IV

‘Salvation, Communion, Reconciliation’: Transforming the Social Context of Death.

Grief, as we have seen, threatens to undo the female subject in the early stages of the novel. Mary’s loss alienates her from her society and the religious establishment. To submit to the dictates of the deacon and minister and to participate in the condolence rituals of her community is to wreak further violence on her already shattered emotions. Yet by the end of the book, when Winifred dies, piety, submissiveness and the social context of death look very different. Roy’s funeral, as we have seen, is an alienating event, offering no consolation and emphasising Mary’s isolation. Winifred’s death is in stark contrast to this. In fact, it seems to be less a death than a direct ascension into heaven. Death is no longer a wrenching dislocation

of emotional ties but a restoration into the presence of already-departed loved ones.

As night falls just before Winifred's death, Mary tells us:

Showery clouds flitted by, but there was a blaze of golden color behind them. It broke through and scattered them; it burned them and melted them; it shot pink and purple jets up to the zenith; it fell and lay in amber mist upon the hills. A soft wind swept by, and darted now and then into the glow, and shifted it about, color away from color and back again.⁶⁵

The scene echoes the visit to Roy's grave earlier in the novel. As in that scene, there is a suggestion of divine presence and harmonious emotional connection in the landscape.

The 'golden light' contrasts with the clouds, and the motion of light breaking through the clouds and illuminating the landscape is telling about the underlying significance of the scene. The clouds which are 'burned', 'scattered' and 'melted' by the heavenly light leave a clear, unobscured view of the divine glory which touches and transforms the scene. The movement of the light is both penetrating and shifting. It is not static, but moves about dynamically, falling and rising and acting upon the landscape that it touches. The wind, we are told, shifts it about, 'color away from color and back again', yet while the light moves through different permutations, it remains constant. This is nothing like Quirk's vision of a static heaven. This heavenly light illuminates and transforms both the physical and emotional landscape. The overall effect is to suggest that doubt, like the obscuring clouds, is being banished, leaving in its place a complete reconciliation with eternal, divine presence. It is not so much a moment of

⁶⁵ Phelps, p.159.

conversion on Mary's part, as the final confirmation of the ongoing process of heavenly embodiment and divine love that Winifred has taught her.

A passage quoted slightly earlier in the text, from Adelaide Proctor's poetry, prepares us for this effect. Mary tells us that Winifred, 'In the place out of which she has gone... has left me peace' and then refers to the 'golden gate' in Proctor's verse,

...round which the kneeling spirits wait. The halo seems to linger round those kneeling closest to the door: The joy that lightened from that place shines still upon the watcher's face.⁶⁶

Here, we are presented with a vision of the heavenly home that is then reiterated in the vision of the heavenly light that Winifred and Mary see before them. Proctor's text, placed in conjunction with the golden sky, suggests that it is indeed the light of heaven that the characters are seeing. The 'golden color' of the sky becomes a continuation of the imagery of the 'golden' gates and light shining from heaven onto the watcher's face. The sky becomes a threshold, beyond which the kneeling spirits are waiting, as though we are being afforded a brief glimpse of the materiality of the spiritual world. This vision of heavenly spirits is noticeably different from Quirk's description early in the novel of the inhabitants of heaven being remote from earthly concerns and focused on divine worship. The attention of these spirits is focused on earth, or rather on the threshold between earth and heaven and the movement between the earthly and

⁶⁶ Phelps, p.159.

spiritual state, and the emphasis is on death as a crossing over from one state to the next rather than as dislocation and absence.

The scene is also framed by the Bible, notably in the words that Winifred singles out: "It is expedient for you that I go away; for, if I go not away, the Comforter will not come." The words, originally spoken by Christ to his disciples emphasise the importance of the process of transfiguration. It is Christ's physical absence that facilitates the presence of the Holy Spirit, the 'comforter'. Here, the Bible is used as a means of structuring and giving meaning to suffering and grief. It is not just that Winifred's physical death allows her to enter the spiritual plane. For those left behind, it is the process of grief and suffering which allows them to receive the comforter and to be lifted up to a higher level of spiritual being. In imitating Christ, Winifred becomes a sacrificial figure, offering her pain and death as a means of spiritual insight and transformation. Her death undoubtedly has a masochistic quality to it. Yet it is not masochistic in the sense of being suffering just for the sake of suffering. Winifred's death dramatizes the act of acceptance of pain as a means of facilitating divine comfort. Phelps does not seek to alleviate suffering by denying it, nor does she suggest a remedy for it that will make it disappear. Instead, she offers Winifred's theological doctrine of divine transformation through suffering as an interpretive framework that consoles because it gives meaning and significance to pain even though it does not banish it.

In her discussion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Jane Tompkins argues that the vocabulary of clasping hands and falling tears is one that modern readers tend to associate with emotional exhibitionism,

...with the overacting which kills off true feeling through exaggeration. But the tears and gestures of Stowe's characters are not in excess of what they feel; if anything they fall short of expressing the experiences they point to - salvation, communion, reconciliation.⁶⁷

Tompkins's argument is of course an important defence of sentimental literature, yet even as she defends Stowe, Tompkins recoils from the notion of emotional 'excess', as opposed to 'true feeling.' The whole point of Winifred's death is to generate emotional excess and to invest it with spiritual significance. Without such intense, excessive pain, grief would not be grief. At the same time, Winifred's theological teachings provide the necessary interpretive framework that gives meaning to suffering and transforms the sufferer. Outside of a religious framework, emotional excess as we have seen with the German poem, becomes threatening, liable to dismantle social structures. Yet once Winifred's doctrine of an embodied heaven has bridged the gap between religion and emotion, not only can feeling be expressed, but emotional expression itself becomes a necessary part of mourning.

When Winifred's body is laid out in the house awaiting burial, people from the neighborhood come to see her and pay their respects. Here, social ritual is

⁶⁷ Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs, The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860*, (Oxford University Press, 1985.) p.132.

infused with feeling, unlike the condolence visits made to Mary early in the novel. She tells us,

They came in with heads uncovered and voices hushed, to see her, in the days while she was lying down stairs among the flowers.

Once when I thought that she was alone, I went in, - it was at twilight, - and turned, startled by a figure that was crouched, sobbing on the floor. "O, I want to go too, I *want* to go too!" It cried. "She's ben there all day long," said Phoebe, wiping her eyes, "and she won't go home for a mouthful of victuals, poor creetur! But she jest sets there and cries and cries, an' there's no stoppin' of her!" It was little Clo. At another time, I was there with fresh flowers, when the door opened, creaking a little, and 'Bin Quirk came in on tiptoe, trying in vain to still the noise of his new boots. His eyes were red and wet, and he held out to me timidly a single white carnation.⁶⁸

The visitors who come to see Winifred are reverential and hushed rather than intrusive, as if they are performing an act of worship. The act of viewing the body as it lies amongst the flowers seems here to be akin to the visiting of a shrine. It is invested with religious significance, profound feeling and social meaning, and the visit to her body draws the village community together in a sustaining way.

It is significant that Phelps foregrounds little Clo, who is Deacon Quirk's niece and Bin Quirk, his son, as representatives of feeling in her descriptions of their visits to the body. We see Clo weeping abjectly and Bin Quirk, humbly offering his single carnation flower. In the course of the book, both have suffered and been converted by Winifred to a belief in heaven as the place which will compensate for the limitations of their earthly lives. Bin Quirk has suffered at the hands of his father and turns to Winifred for help, asking her miserably how "....a benevolent God ever

⁶⁸ Phelps, p.161.

would ha' made such a derved awkward chap as I am!"⁶⁹ Clo attends Winifred's Sunday-school class, and is, ' a pretty, soft-eyed little creature, with a shrinking mouth, and an absorbing passion for music, which she has always been too poor to gratify.'⁷⁰ Both are disenfranchised characters, and both are humble and childlike, which makes them receptive to Winifred's teachings. Their conversions reflect on a lesser scale the conversion that Mary has undergone, and they demonstrate that Winifred's teaching extends beyond Mary and into the community. In addition to this, the way that these two characters suddenly come into focus at the close of the novel reflects a democratisation of feeling. The characters who are most moved by Winifred's death are humble, 'awkward', poor, and they are elevated by their capacity for feeling and for religious faith. The effect of this is to suggest a restructuring of the community in relation to grief and the expression of feeling. The social hierarchy is inverted so that the characters that acquire the most significance are the ones who have been brought closest to heaven through their suffering.

At the beginning of the novel, the community's reception of Roy's death is structured by the social protocol of the condolence visit and the theological doctrine of Dr. Bland and Deacon Quirk. In the aftermath of Winifred's death, we do not see the minister or the deacon at all. There is also no description of Winifred's funeral. When Roy's body has been brought home, Mary gives us an elliptical account of his funeral, which stresses the bare physical facts of his body being 'attended to' and then left outside in the cold. Early on in the novel Mary tells us:

⁶⁹ Phelps, p.119.

⁷⁰ Phelps, p.98.

The bare blank sense of physical repulsion from death, which was all the idea I had of anything when they first brought him home, has not gone yet. It is horrible. It was cruel. Roy, all I had in the wide world, - Roy, with the flash in his eyes, with his smile that lighted the house all up; with his pretty, soft hair that I used to kiss and curl about my fingers, his bounding step, his strong arms that folded me in and cared for me, - Roy snatched away in an instant by a dreadful God and laid out there in the wet and snow, - never to kiss him, never to see him any more!⁷¹

It is a description that stresses the physical horror of death. The overriding image of the funeral is of the body going into the ground and being left to the merciless elements. Whilst Mary's memories of Roy present a vivid physical embodiment of him, she has no means of reconciling this with the fact of his death. In contrast with this, there is no reference to Winifred's body going into the ground and this reflects the way that death has become a spiritual rather than a physical process. The conclusion of *The Gates Ajar* represents the triumph of Winifred's religious doctrine and a successful transformation of society. By the end of the novel, the characters have learned how to give expression to grief as a shared experience that reinforces their ties to each other as a community. Similarly, religious doctrine has altered so that it performs a structuring effect on grief. Rather than denying loss, Winifred's doctrine allows the mourners to picture the loved one in heaven and, most crucially, to want to be there themselves. They have learned how to invest in the economy of grief that allows loss to be transformed into loving spiritual presence and for ties of affection to be transferred, intact, into heaven.

⁷¹ Phelps, p.10.

Phelps, then, attempts to reestablish social bonds so that grief can be managed. Just as Freud is prepared to allow mourning to begin so long as he can envisage an end to it, Phelps seeks to legitimate mourning within a religious framework that envisages a triumphant end to grief, in heaven. In contrast, Piatt is prepared to articulate despair, anger and resistance rather than submission to God's will, as is exemplified by her poem 'We Two' that we explored in the Introduction. Unlike Phelps, she does not attempt to contain grief within a religious framework, nor does she disavow those aspects of mourning which Phelps finds so troubling. Instead, via mourning, Piatt interrogates the status quo, and in particular the ideologies that sent men (particularly Southern men) off to war in the first place, as we shall now go on to explore.

Chapter Two

Mourning and Memorialisation in Piatt's War Poetry.

I

‘The Grave-Yard Sun’: Melancholic Remembrance and the Southern Cause.

We saw in the previous chapter how Winifred functions in *The Gates Ajar*, as a mediator between social structures of containment (particularly religious doctrine) and the potentially destructive and excessive ‘miasma’ of postwar grief. She offers a model of mourning that allows both for the expression of grief and its containment when it threatens to overwhelm social frameworks (for example when grief threatens to destroy rather than merely reframe religious faith or when it transgresses the limits of Victorian femininity). The most crucial difference between Piatt and Phelps is that, for Piatt, this model of mediation is no longer viable. In effect, Piatt does away with Winifred and confronts loss and mourning from a perspective that moves beyond Phelps’ message of authoritative and disciplinary ‘love power’ and its accompanying consolatory vision of heavenly re-embodiment. In this chapter, I will focus on how Piatt resists finding a ‘solution’ to grief through sentimental religious consolation, and

instead problematises the idea that grief (or indeed the war itself) can be closed off, brought to an end, ‘done with’. Indeed, as I will discuss in section two, while Northern writers such as Walt Whitman and Harriet Beecher Stowe, as well as Phelps, envisage a harmonious, reunified America after the war, Piatt remains acutely aware that while America may have become a Union once again, it was not by any means unified. Via Jean-François Lyotard’s theorisation of the public memorial as a process of selective remembering and forgetting that purports to reveal the ‘truth’ of a complex and traumatic event such as the Civil War, I will go on to explore how Piatt interrogates this process of memorialisation. I will argue that in doing so, she holds up to scrutiny both the myth of a pre-lapsarian antebellum South, and the image of a newly redeemed and pastoral America that was being perpetuated by Northern writers.

I want to begin my discussion of Piatt’s war poetry by exploring the way in which she interrogates the Christian myth of resurrection in relation to mourning in the South, in her poem, ‘One from the Dead’ (1871). This poem is a particularly useful starting point because, like *The Gates Ajar*, it begins with a domestic space that the war has transformed into a scene of mourning. But while it mimics the conventional narrative of intolerable grief followed by Christian consolation, the poem radically problematises this narrative, delineating religious consolation as a symptom rather than a resolution of the mourner’s predicament.

‘One From The Dead’.

“Yes, yes! It is nine years, you say?
There is his portrait. He was handsome. Yes!”

His mother's mother kept her eyes away,
But pointed up, and I could guess.

- 5 He was remembered in his room:
Of him pet window-flowers, in odors, dreamed;
His shut piano under their sad bloom,
The coffin of dead music seemed.

- His vain-plumed hat was there; there, too
10 The sword, whose bitter cause was never gained;
The coat, with glimmering shoulder-leaves, shot through
The breast, I think, and fiercely stained.

- Yet, till I saw his name – the one
His youth had soiled – above the creeping dew
15 Thrust high, to whiten in the grave-yard sun:
I vaguely felt, I darkly knew.

- Oh, coward-praise men give to dust,
Only when it lies motionless and mute
Beneath the shining slander, which it must
20 Not, till the Judgement-light refute!

What more? If one, with voice and breath,
Had given to one a rose-geranium bud,
And changed with moons, and vanished into death
In far-back feuds of hate and blood;

- 25 If that one, from great after-grief –
In some long, empty, lonesome cry had said,
“I would believe; help Thou mine unbelief
With One that was – One from the Dead;”

- And felt a sudden, luminous Face –
30 Sweet terror, yet divinest quiet, there;
And reached to find that Thorns were in the place
Of lovely, worldly-fancied hair;

- That Hands, not such as gave old flowers,
But torn with Nails, had blessed a piteous head,
35 That Doubt's slow question, from the unlighted hours,
Was answered by One from the Dead;

If this had been – You smile, and say to me,
“It were Illusion shaped of wandering sleep!”
Well, if it were illusion, let it be:

40 I have a tender Faith to keep.

The poem poses a set of problems at the most basic interpretative level. Who is speaking to whom? When and where do the events in the poem take place and how do they relate to each other? And who or what exactly is the 'One from the Dead' who returns, or seems to return in the penultimate stanzas? In declining to offer us the usual points of orientation in terms of 'who', 'what' and 'where', which would allow us to make sense of the poem's narrative, (although it would be more accurate to say that these are not refused entirely but are radically undercut). Piatt structures the poem instead around a process of return and repetition. Rather than a sequential unfolding of events, the poem follows the associative twists and turns of memory and in doing this figures the act of remembering not as an unproblematic recollection of the past, but rather as a piecing together of fragments which only ever add up to an incomplete picture. Similarly, if the recollection of the past is always partial (in the sense both of structural incompleteness and of subjective bias) then the present is figured as being subject to the past rather than being a point from which the past may be viewed with any sense of stable objectivity. This instability between past and present implies a similar lack of stability in the relations between the living and the dead and in turn this disrupts the idea of mourning as a process that works to bring about closure or ending.

The poem begins by projecting us straight into the middle of an exchange between the speaker and the grandmother of the dead soldier:

“Yes, yes! It is nine years you say?
There is his portrait. He was handsome. Yes!”

His mother's mother kept her eyes away.
But pointed up, and I could guess.

The effect of this is that, like the poem's speaker, we must resort to a form of 'guessing' to piece together the narrative of the soldier's death. The juxtaposition of 'there is his portrait' and 'he was handsome', implies that the event nine years ago that the grandmother refers to is the soldier's death. Similarly, the grandmother's gesture of keeping her eyes averted is one of ritualized grief. In keeping with sentimental codes of mourning the act of turning away and hiding the face indicates the profundity of the mourner's loss, demonstrating that it is a 'sincerely' felt grief while at the same time keeping the expression of grief within the bounds of genteel emotional propriety.¹

In the second and third stanzas the scene shifts from the conversation between the grandmother and the speaker, to the speaker's glimpse of the dead soldier's room. Here we are confronted with a domestic space that is filled with tokens of him: his piano, his uniform and his sword. This scene, particularly the second stanza, is full of images of enclosure. The 'pet window flowers' (line 6) suggest an artificial, static existence, their purpose being to smell sweet and to prettify the interior of the room. Here nature is tamed, shut away from the outside world and divorced from the processes of growth, decay and regeneration. The 'shut piano' is a 'coffin of dead music' (line 8), another stifling image of enclosure that irresistibly calls to mind the idea of being buried alive. Ostensibly the objects in the soldier's room have a sentimental pathos. They are imbued with his presence, and in this way his room becomes a shrine that, in keeping with nineteenth-century mourning practice, testifies

¹ For a detailed discussion of the cult of mourning in nineteenth-century America, see Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982) pp.124-152.

to his continued remembrance and hence the strength of familial affective ties that are unbroken by death.² Yet the soldier's room has disturbing implications. It seems not only to be a shrine but also a tomb that walls in the living as well as the dead. The images of containment, of the indoor flowers blooming over the coffin-like piano and the dead music shut up inside it, map an internal psychic landscape that is equally enclosed and static. It is telling that two of the verbs in the second stanza, 'dreamed' and 'seemed' apply to the objects in the room rather than to any specific subject, though their proximity to the grandmother in the first stanza suggests that she is the one who is doing the 'remembering'. Displacing this process of remembering and 'dreaming' from a specific subject on to the objects in the room is suggestive of the way in which, for the melancholic subject, grief and attachment to the dead are all-consuming, colouring the surrounding world, so that melancholia in effect becomes an entire worldview, literally something through which one *sees*. It is noticeable that this ritualized form of memorializing the soldier registers as excess remembrance rather than as a therapeutic ritual that might allow the mourner to express her grief and ultimately to free herself from it. Here the attachment to the dead is not, as in Phelps, something that turns out to be a good thing, freeing the living to go about their business on earth whilst all the time they are guided by the benign spiritual presence of dead loved ones. Instead this process of 'remembering' does not allow the dead to be put to rest but becomes a form of melancholia, a prolonged attachment (this extended

² Halttunen describes how within sentimental mourning codes, mourning functioned as proof of continuing remembrance of the dead on the part of the bereaved and of the continuing strength of domestic ties of affection. Halttunen says, 'Within the sentimental view, death was not enough to sever the bonds of domestic love. The departed loved one acted as a guardian angel who shed continued influence over the heart of the mourner... The bonds of love that stretched across the great divide of death were thus believed stronger than those ties that bound families together in life'. Halttunen, p.130.

grieving has been going on for nine years) that alienates the mourner from the rest of the world.

In the third stanza the speaker comments on the dead soldier's uniform:

His vain-plumed hat was there; there, too,
 10 The sword, whose bitter cause was never gained;
 The coat, with glimmering shoulder-leaves shot through
 The breast, I think, and fiercely stained.

Here the ideological burden of this process of memorializing the soldier becomes overt, as does the speaker's distance from it. The 'bitter cause' that was 'never gained' (line 10) identifies the soldier and the household as Confederate. It also reveals the extent to which the Confederacy itself is being mourned here as well as the individual soldier and the way that the dead man himself is being remembered primarily *as* a soldier. The Grandmother remarks that he was 'handsome' (line 2) and his uniform attests to his violent death in battle. That word 'handsome' is significant because it illustrates how, for the grandmother at least, the display of his uniform carries a particular symbolic coding of heroic masculinity. It is a version of masculinity that has become an emblem of the chivalric ideals of nobility and heroism that defeated Southerners identified with the Old South. The soldier, in other words, stands for more than just himself. He represents all the doomed glory and heroic valour of Southern manhood and of the Confederate Cause. In mourning him, the grandmother is also mourning an idealized version of a way of life and a stable framework of values that have passed away.

The soldier's uniform is significant not only for the way that it symbolises the Lost Cause but also for the way that it is placed in a feminised, domestic setting, so that the public violence of the war is situated within the private space of the home. In her study of women's writing and the Civil War, Elizabeth Young comments on the way that women played a crucial role in the rehabilitation of Confederate manhood and the Lost Cause after the North's humiliating defeat of the South:

Emerging in the 1860's, Lost Cause imagery praised the valor of the Confederacy and particularly its men. The iconic celebration of Confederate masculinity extended from Confederate Memorial Day tributes to the common soldier to the sanctification of the hero of the Lost Cause, Robert E. Lee... White women were indispensable to the creation of this imagery, both literally and metaphorically... To rejuvenate Southern manhood, white women were to function as iconic repositories of the tragic glory of the Confederacy. Female imagery included the representation of women as devoted Confederate wives, selfless mothers, or patriotic daughters.³

In becoming 'iconic repositories of the tragic glory of the Confederacy', women's private grief became a role of public sacrifice that kept the Lost Cause alive. Mourning, as the poem suggests, is not a laying to rest of the Old South. Instead it becomes an ongoing attachment that refuses to let go of the dead or the 'bitter cause' of the South. Thus mourning reveals the extent to which the New South was still inhabited by the old order and as Piatt shows, it reflects the way that women were trapped in a position of culturally sanctioned melancholic 'remembering' that was in itself deadening and which kept them subordinated to the values of patriarchal Southern chivalry.

³ Young, p.176.

In describing the soldier's room, the poem criticises this sanctification of the Confederacy. The 'vain-plumed hat' (line 9) suggests that the glory of Confederate masculinity is itself a kind of 'vain' false pride and similarly the cause of Confederate nationalism leads to unfulfilled 'bitterness' and division not triumph, because it is based on unrealistic ideals. The 'shoulder-leaves' of the soldier's coat that mark his high military rank are viewed sceptically by the speaker. To speak of them as 'glimmering' (line 11) suggests that the stars that decorate the shoulder-leaves of high-ranking soldiers shine with a false brightness that is merely an outward show of the illusory glory of war and a means of masking the grim reality of violent death in battle. The bloodstained coat 'shot through the breast' is the end result of the narrative of heroism that it is supposed to display. It is also the point at which we can see most clearly what is at stake in terms of how to 'read' the poem. The soldier's uniform is intended to demonstrate his heroism and the glory of the Confederate cause: clearly the speaker is intended to interpret it this way and she knows this. To view it in this way would be to inscribe the marks of violence on the uniform within a framework of heroic sacrifice for a nationalistic cause, as a means of justifying the shedding of blood. What Piatt gives us instead is the speaker's failed reading of this. In other words, she opens up a distance between how the speaker is supposed to see the soldier's death and how she actually sees it. In critiquing the idea of sacrifice for the 'Lost Cause' and the rhetoric of manly heroism, the poem offers an alternative reading of the soldier's death that refuses to contain it within a framework of patriotism and heroism. In the speaker's interpretation of the soldier's uniform, the marks of violent death on it become the point at which the self-justifying rhetoric of war collapses. The

narrative of war becomes impossible to read as anything other than futile and ‘vain’ once it is viewed simply as violence and death, divorced from the codes of valour and patriotism that sustain it.

Here, Piatt is critiquing the rhetoric of war in relation to Southern codes of chivalrous manhood, but it is clear that as a Southerner, Piatt saw the North and its military leaders as equally culpable in their idealisation of ‘heroism’ to mask the reality of violence and death on the battle-field. In the first two stanzas of her 1871 poem, ‘Shoulder-Rank’ for example, she scathingly refers to the Northern military academy West Point as a factory for producing war heroes:

“West Point?” Yes, that was the one grand argument ever so long
At the capital, I remember now, in our far-back battledays:
If the hour’s great Leader blundered and war, therefore, went wrong,
West Point would give a subtle faith in that great Leader’s ways.

- 5 West Point – Ah, well, no doubt they can graduate generals there,
Why, I wonder they do not send them out, plumed, sworded, and ready-scurr’d,
And just because one when a boy has happened somehow to wear
The uniform of their cadets, let his shoulders be splendidly starr’d!
(Stanzas 1-2)

Thus Piatt indicts the North (both the public and its military leaders) for its misplaced faith in the trappings of military rank in the face of the fact that war has a way of ‘going wrong’ and that military leaders turn out not to be invulnerable and are liable to make ‘blunders’ that lead to huge loss of life.

While ‘Shoulder-Rank’ is openly sarcastic in its attack on the military establishment, ‘One from the Dead’ exemplifies a subtler form of criticism. The description of the soldier’s room reflects the way in which, to paraphrase Timothy Sweet, war opens up a fundamental crisis of representation, one in which, ‘the transformation of wounds into words is, for the ideologically aware individual, an extraordinarily problematic endeavour’. Sweet argues that

...wounds come to be perceived in separation from bodies, as objects in themselves...The displacement of the body by ideology is possible because wounds are referentially unstable and thus can be appropriated rhetorically as signs of the legitimacy of an ideological position...Thus, ideologies and political structures are overturned or conserved as a result of war, while the violation of human bodies never bears any direct referential relation to the issues that wars are said to be about. Our Civil War, for example, is said to have been fought entirely by “Americans”, entirely on the soil of the “United States”. But this conventional description of the war was itself one of the representational questions at issue – for it is only possible to say in retrospect that the Confederates were rebellious “Americans” because the Northern states won the war... Poetic and photographic representations of the war aided political discourse in the project of legitimating the violent conservation of the Union by reflecting on and participating in the transformation of wounds into ideology during and after the Civil War...as in any war, the idioms of heroism, sacrifice and so on were spoken alike by Union and Confederate soldiers and civilians to justify killing and dying “for” their respective causes.⁴

Piatt highlights this crisis of representation in the gap that she opens up between the bloodstained coat and the discourse of heroism that attempts to recuperate the violence of war within the framework of the Lost Cause. In making this process of the ideological transformation of wounds explicit, ideology itself becomes fragile: it is revealed precisely *as* ideology rather than unquestionable truth. The ‘idioms of heroism and sacrifice’ as Sweet calls them are not self-evident truths for Piatt, and

⁴ Timothy Sweet, *Traces of War. Poetry, Photography, and the Crisis of the Union*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp 2-3.

once these are called into question, then the war itself as a means of producing a legitimate political consensus is also questionable. So too is the idea that any particular side can occupy the moral high ground since both are equally embroiled in the rhetoric of patriotism and heroics that seeks to justify killing and dying in the war and effaces the reality of the violation of human bodies.

The soldier's 'soiled name' presents a different aspect of his identity that apparently contradicts his heroism;

Yet, till I saw his name – the one
 His youth had soiled – above the creeping dew
 15 Thrust high, to whiten in the grave-yard sun:
 I vaguely felt, I darkly knew.

Oh, coward-praise men give to dust,
 Only when it lies motionless and mute
 Beneath the shining slander, which it must
 20 Not, till the Judgement-light, refute! (Stanzas 4-5)

We are not told exactly what the soldier has done in his youth to 'soil' his name. (Given Southern codes of masculinity and honour, it is likely to have been some act of 'cowardice', such as failing to turn up after being challenged to a duel). Whatever the reason for it, his damaged reputation presents a competing version of him that contradicts his image as a war hero. Within the framework of Southern codes of chivalry, to have dishonoured his name represents a blemish on his masculinity. It is interesting, however, that just as the speaker refuses to identify him as a hero she also resists identifying him as a villain. She is equally distanced from the display of his heroism and from the 'slander' that indicts him. It is not so much that the one cancels

out the other but rather that in refusing to recognise him in either version, the speaker implies that the framework of masculinity itself is a kind of fiction.

The poem's critique of masculinity ties in with a fundamental uncertainty in relation to naming and identity. We saw in the second and third stanzas how the soldier's room becomes an enclosing space of melancholia which walls in the mourner, and this pattern is repeated when the speaker sees the soldier's name in the graveyard in stanza four. Ostensibly this setting contrasts with the enclosure of the room: it is outside, open to the dew and the sun, indeed the image of the name, '...above the creeping dew/ Thrust high, to whiten in the grave-yard sun' (lines 14-15), is almost pastoral, suggesting a transformative natural process of return to the earth. His name is worn away by the encroaching dew and the sun, just as his body will whiten to bone and then finally 'dust' (line 17). Yet if we examine the imagery of illumination in the fourth and fifth stanzas, it becomes apparent that something strange is happening. The image of whitening in the sun suggests not only bleaching and fading but, paradoxically, a sense of added brightness, even overexposure, that is caused by the light of the 'grave-yard sun'. What does it mean to see things by the light of a 'grave-yard sun'? To speak of the sun in these terms suggests that it is tainted with death and gives out a deathly light. As with the glimpse that we get of the soldier's room, the effect of this is to suggest that mourning is literally governing the act of seeing. We are being presented with another enclosing space of melancholic mourning, only this time melancholia registers as an uncanny visual effect, a deathly illumination that casts a distorting light on the surrounding world. The implication of

over-exposure in the idea of 'whitening' is significant when we think of over-exposure as an excessive and incessant focus on something, in this case the dead. If an image is over-exposed, it is also blurred, meaningless and indefinable, a point at which meaning breaks down, just as the sun leaches away the name on the grave, making it, finally, unreadable. To see by the light of a graveyard sun is both a metaphor for the predicament of being trapped within melancholia and also a figuration of the way that death troubles categories of meaning, particularly naming and identity, subjecting them, as it were, to a kind of over-exposure.

In the fifth stanza, 'shining slander' presents us with another image of illumination but as in the previous stanza, this turns out to be a distorted way of seeing. 'Slander' echoes the soldier's soiled name in line fourteen and the speaker seems to be anticipating a time of final, divine Judgment when it will be refuted. But, equally, that refutation applies to 'praise' (line 17). Here praise and slander are both inverted, praise becoming 'cowardly' and slander becoming something that 'shines' and illuminates (line 19). This inversion blurs the boundaries between them, suggesting that both alike are a form of false representation. Its quality of 'shining' is what ties 'slander' in with that other image of uncanny illumination in the previous stanza, the 'grave-yard sun', signaling that here, too, we are being presented with a distorted mode of viewing the dead. 'Shining' also echoes the 'glimmering' shoulder leaves of the soldier's uniform thus linking the tokens of heroism in stanza three to slander and, implicitly, to 'coward praise'. Both of these imply a judgment of the dead man that is being spoken by others and which values him in terms of masculine

honour and heroism and confers meaning on his death according to that framework. Thus praise and slander represent the false meaning that these standards bestow on the soldier's death; it is in effect a betrayal of meaning. Through the trope of false illumination – illumination that distorts and betrays both the viewer and the object of the gaze – Piatt represents death as a troubling of meaning, a point at which frameworks of representation become at once distorted and distorting. What is at stake, ultimately, is the impossibility of containing the soldier's death within the existing cultural framework that assigns meaning to it. In other words, Piatt is foregrounding the gap between cultural meaning and the essential meaninglessness of death.

Yet if death threatens cultural meaning and order, there is also a longing on the speaker's part for meaning to be restored. The speaker invokes the 'Judgment-light' (line 20) as the point when false representations will be 'refuted' and fall away. Similarly, the speaker's comment in stanza four, 'I darkly knew' echoes Saint Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians:

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.⁵

The extract from Corinthians refers to the 'parousia', the eschatological coming of Christ and the resurrection of the dead at Judgment Day. In the context of the poem's images of illumination, 'I darkly knew' (line 16), is another instance of perception and knowledge being inverted. When considered in relation to the verse from the Bible, the

⁵ 1 Corinthians, Chapter 13, verse 12. King James Bible.

idea of the speaker knowing ‘darkly’ (i.e. imperfectly) exceeds the question of whether or not she is in possession of the facts of the dead man’s history and identity, and refers to incomplete and partial knowledge as a permanent state. To give a brief exegesis, ‘seeing darkly’ refers to the fallen state of mankind. As a result of original sin, mankind is subject to death, and is only able to apprehend God imperfectly and partially, whereas, ‘then’, that is, at the projected coming of Jesus and raising of the dead, we will see ‘face to face’, in other words we will apprehend God clearly and perfectly and will in turn be known and judged according to our sins. Thus for the speaker, the teleology of Christian faith ultimately offers a way of distinguishing between false, slanderous forms of representation and truth. The ‘Judgment-light’ is a divine Judgment that will, literally, shed light on mourning and its problems of identity and absence. Here too, it is worth noting, Piatt is presenting us with another time frame – that of divine and eternal time - which seemingly offers an end-point and a point of comprehension for the shifting and densely-textured temporal framework figured in the poem.

In the sixth and seventh stanzas the puzzling narrative of the dead soldier and the speaker’s relation to him is replaced by a different scene:

What more? If one, with voice and breath,
 Had given to one a rose-geranium bud,
 And changed with moons, and vanished into death
 In far-back feuds of hate and blood;

25 If that one, from great after-grief –
 In some long, empty, lonesome cry had said,
 “I would believe; help Thou mine unbelief

With One that was – One from the Dead;”

The dynamic of ‘he’ and ‘I’ that structures the speaker’s musings on the dead soldier is transformed into ‘one’ and ‘one’ in the sixth stanza. This bewildering slippage of pronouns creates a sense of instability at the level of subject positions, making the poem’s meaning even more enigmatic. There is a dreamlike sense of fluidity and mobility in this slippage as though the narrative of the dead soldier, apparently displaced by this scene, resurfaces and coalesces with it. As with a dream, the poem seems to be working metonymically, so that the content of the sixth and seventh stanzas rhymes, as it were, with that of the previous stanzas.

The ‘far-back feuds of hate and blood’ (line 24) suggest that the death of the ‘one’ who gives the rose-geranium bud is caused by war and the ‘one’ who receives the bud is then left behind in ‘great after-grief’. Here, in other words, we have a repetition of mourning for a dead loved one who has been killed in battle. The bud itself offers an important clue as to how to read this scene, given that the majority of Piatt’s Civil War poems feature this flower. As Paula Bernat Bennett notes in her reading of, ‘The Grave at Frankfort’,

It is the flower – sometimes a “blush-rose”, sometimes a “rose geranium” and sometimes, as in “Giving Back the Flower”, merely a bud – that identifies “The Grave at Frankfort” as a Civil War poem and that relates it to other Piatt poems in which her speaker explores the significance of her relationship to her (now dead) lover(s). For this is the rose that ‘he’ gave her before he went off to die of a wound...in the breast.⁶

⁶ Paula Bernat Bennett, ‘John James Piatt and (1835-1917), Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt (1836-1919)’. in *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Eric L. Haralson, (Chicago and London: Fitzroy Demborn, 1998), pp.328-334 (p.331).

We can move some way towards decoding the opaque meaning of these stanzas when we read them in the context of the symbolic significance of the rose, exchanged between a soldier and his sweetheart before he dies in the Civil War. While its colour is not explicitly referred to as red in the poem, 'bud' (line 22) rhymes with 'blood' (line 24) suggesting that the rose, traditionally a symbol of romantic love, is here transformed into a wound. That the rose should become a symbol of wounding suggests that romantic love is implicated in the 'feuds of hate and blood' (line 24).⁷ Certainly, in the context of the romantic narrative that shapes Piatt's war poetry, the 'one' who receives the flower becomes the bearer of an ambiguous wound. The wound is multivalent; when we bear in mind Freud's description of melancholia as '...an open wound, drawing to itself cathectic energies...from all directions', the rose as wound seems to be functioning as a symbol of melancholic loss.⁸ As well as this, its movement between the giver and the receiver seems to confer a kind of blood-guilt

⁷ Bennett points out in her discussion of Piatt and contemporary Civil War poetry that, '[a]s Oliver Wendell Holmes recognized in his energetic call-to-arms, "Never or Now", a woman's rose is, finally, just one more incentive to use when urging young men to go out and die. In this context, the flower's color, not its traditional function as a symbol for love and peace, is valorized. Far more than its symbolic associations, its color bespeaks the flower's "true" significance in the web of social meaning that war, history and politics weave:

Break from the arms that would fondly caress you!
Hark! 'tis the bugle-blast, sabres are drawn!
Mothers shall pray for you, fathers shall bless you,
Maidens shall weep for you when you are gone!

Never or now! Cries the blood of a nation,
Poured on the turf where the red rose should bloom;
Now is the day and the hour of salvation, -
Never or now! Peals the trumpet of doom!

Coming from a border state, Sarah Piatt knew that the mere fact of being situated in the North or South made no difference... Whatever the side in the war, the rhetoric did not change, nor did the response that men and women had to it. Roses, like everything else, were part of the language (and ideology) that lured men to war and led women to cheer them on. Bennett, (1998), pp.331-2.

⁸ Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p.253.

onto the one who receives it that reflects the female subject's complicity in the ideology that sends men off to war. Taken thus, the flower signifies a wounding that is ideologically determined, as though to receive the rose is to assume a position of melancholic mourning by taking up, figuratively, the corporeal wounds of the war dead.

The fact that the flower appears so consistently in Piatt's poetry in the context of the Civil War suggests that the 'far-back feuds of hate and blood' are inextricably linked to the war. Yet the temporal ambiguity of the sixth and seventh stanzas makes the scene where the flower is given impossible to locate within a particular time-frame either in relation to the events in the rest of the poem or in terms of the speaker's own past. It is initially referred to in the past conditional ('If one... Had given) which suggests that it may after all only be hypothetical. Then again, the rose, with its implied reference to the Civil War, seems to shape the meaning of the scene in terms of (for the speaker) the recent past, while 'far-back feuds' points to a much more remote past. The scenario thus seems to embody all of these time frames simultaneously while being exclusively present in none of them. If we look closely though, we can gain a sense of how Piatt's refusal to secure the scene within a single time frame is working thematically. Within this temporal ambiguity, in other words, is an implicit criticism of the Christian idea of a Last Judgment figured in stanza five.

We can begin to explore this with the idea of 'feuds' in stanza six. A feud is a series of violent acts of revenge and counter-revenge between groups who are closely

related either by ties of kin or by similar laws and common interests. In effect, violence which exceeds a single causative moment and becomes repetitive and self-perpetuating, as the speaker describes it, a cycle of 'hate and blood' (line 24). To speak of 'far-back feuds of hate and blood' is a loaded way of referring to the Civil War. By comparing the war to a feud Piatt deflates the high-minded rhetoric of patriotism and religion employed by both sides and reduces the war to a squabble between two self-interested and rivalrous groups. In addition to this, viewing it through the lens of 'far-back feuds' (line 24) suggests that, while we think of a war as something that ends finally, in victory or defeat, a feud is something that resists closure. Instead it is impossible to win because each 'victory' calls for a counter-victory, each death ensures a revenge killing, in an unending cycle of tit for tat. Thus while the North may have declared victory and the war may be finished, in the sense that the guns have stopped firing, the ideological conflict that motivated it is far from over. As Richard Gray describes ;

Southerners had experienced a comprehensive defeat after a genuinely heroic struggle...and they were suffering further deprivation even though the war was over. That in itself was bad enough. But to this was added the sense that "the Yankees" were proclaiming their military defeat as a moral one, and offering their now unquestioned political and economic ascendancy as proof positive of the justice of their original case. Southerners...were...troubled by feelings of bitterness and resentment – a nagging sense that, having been defeated, they were now being humiliated as well. Their response to this...was perhaps predictable: defensiveness turned gradually into defiance and a proud determination to tell *their* story, *their* side of things. One form this reaction took...was the tendency to look back with regret at the good old days before the war...Another form... was the impulse felt by many Southerners to retell the story of the war itself – to define the region in terms of the one, crucial

moment in its history when it tried to defend its culture and its identity by simple force of arms.⁹

The poem explores what it means to be caught up in a continuing dynamic of revenge and counter-revenge, not in terms of physical violence per se, but at the level of representation and ideology. An instance of this can be seen in the grandmother's mourning for the dead soldier at the start of the poem. As we saw earlier, the grandmother, in refusing to give up the dead, is clinging to the ideology of the Confederacy in the face of Northern victory. As well as this, the uniform displays not only the soldier's heroism, but also the fact that his blood has been spilt, amounting to a call for revenge. As Gray points out, the North's representation of itself as the triumphant (moral) victor ensures, in the South, a counter mobilisation of Lost Cause ideology, a move that, ominously, encodes the possibility of further violence.

In this way, Piatt presents the end of the war as the opening out of a continuing and age-old ideological struggle rather than as a moment of closure. The 'war', in other words, cannot be halted, even and especially, when it is 'over'. The implications of the temporal uncertainty of the sixth stanza, then, seem to be that the Civil War, as a historical moment, is inhabited (one might say haunted) simultaneously by the 'hate and blood' of the past and by the future violence of which it is a prefigurement.

If the possibility of a single stable ideological position and temporal domain vanish in the second half of the poem, so too does the identity of the speaker. It is striking that from line twenty-one onwards there are no first person pronouns until the

⁹ Richard Gray, *Writing the South, Ideas of an American Region*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) pp.75-76.

final stanza.¹⁰ As we saw earlier, the relationship between the first scene, where the speaker visits the Confederate household and encounters the soldier's grave, rhymes with the content of the sixth and seventh stanzas. The effect of this is to suggest that the second scene is structured as a kind of replaying of the first, a replaying which subjects that first scene to the slippage and substitution that characterise dream-work, and thus holds the two scenes in a relationship of ambiguous difference. It is a difference that is replicated in the speaker's relation to the figure who receives the rose and then prays for the return of the one from the dead. Just as the first scene is a submerged presence in the second, the speaker's identity seems to be latent in this second scene. In substituting 'one' for 'I', the speaker invokes a pronoun that both neutralises her presence and implicates her, so that she appears to be both protagonist and narrator yet is not definitively either. In other words, 'one' suggests both a first and a third person position.

Yet in the final scene this seems to be resolved as the subject positions stabilise into 'You' and 'I', in a resolution that, significantly, comes about only after the redemptive return of the 'One' who appears to the mourner:

25 If that one, from great after-grief –
 In some long, empty lonesome cry – had said,
 "I would believe: help Thou mine unbelief
 With One that was – One from the Dead;"

And felt a sudden luminous Face –

¹⁰ With the exception, that is, of line twenty-seven in which an 'I' is articulated within inverted commas as the voice of the receiver of the bud. Even this 'I', however, becomes inseparable from the instability of the speaker's own identity.

30 Sweet terror, yet divinest quiet, there;
 And reached to find that Thorns were in the place
 Of lovely, worldly-fancied hair;

 That Hands, not such as gave old flowers
 But torn with Nails had blessed a piteous head:
 35 That Doubt's slow question, from the unlighted hours,
 Was answered by One from the Dead;

 If this had been – You smile and say to me,
 “It were Illusion, shaped of wandering sleep!”
 Well, if it were illusion, let it be:
 40 I have a tender Faith to keep. (Stanzas 7-10)

The ‘One’ who appears with His thorns and His blessing is clearly identifiable as Christ. At the same time, however, this spectral figure is overdetermined. It incorporates the traces of several identities. This is in spite of the fact that the speaker reaches to find thorns instead of hair and tells us that the apparition’s hands are, ‘not such as gave old flowers’ (line 33). This description would seem to be a negation of the possibility that the figure might also include the identity of the one who gave the flowers. That the figure is referred to as ‘One’, though, seems to work against this negation. If ‘One’ returns in answer to the mourner’s desire for the dead ‘one’ who has given the bud then this in turn, given the poem’s dreamlike logic, as well as the significance of the flower in relation to the Civil War, suggests that the ‘One’ who returns is also the dead Confederate soldier.

Just as the ‘one’ who receives the flower works as both a first and a third person term that includes and disguises the presence of the narrator, so this capitalised ‘One’ becomes a unifying term. In this way, the spectral figure of Christ is also a composite of several identities, merged together in a unifying ‘Oneness’.

At first glance, then, the Christian doctrine of resurrection and revelation does appear to be fulfilled through the return of the 'One' from the dead in the final stanzas. The end of the poem, in other words, seems to envisage an end to mourning. The point at which the mourner reaches to find thorns in the place of hair and is blessed by the hands 'torn with nails' (line 34) echoes the biblical scene where Christ appears to doubting Thomas, displaying his wounds as testimony of His death and resurrection.¹¹ The representation of Christ as a sacrificial figure is particularly significant in the context of the sacrificial death of the Confederate soldier. As well as this, the appearance of the crucified Christ signals the way in which the poem, and the mourning it describes, are apparently resolved through an appeal to the biblical idea of ending, in a move that reiterates the speaker's earlier reference to the Judgment-light. The figure of Christ is crucial because He operates as a guarantee that death can be overcome through the resurrection. Christ's resurrection is not just His own, it is also the promise of resurrection and eternal life for all those who believe in Him.¹² Implicitly then, this represents an end to mourning, since if death is transcended through eternal life then loss and mourning are also brought to an end. In a move not unlike the one that Phelps makes in *The Gates Ajar*, the poem seems to be using Christian doctrine as a form of consolation by asserting that the presence of the dead

¹¹ See John, X. 25-28, King James Bible.

¹² As *The New Bible Dictionary* describes it, 'Christ's resurrection was not merely the restoration of a dead body to life; it was the first stage of the eschatological resurrection of the last day. His resurrection is the 'firstfruits', [sic] the beginning of the eschatological harvest (1 Cor. XV. 23)...The resurrection of those in Christ is therefore guaranteed by the fact of His resurrection (1 Cor. XV. 12-20)...' p.388. And elsewhere the dictionary explains succinctly that '[t]he general New Testament position is that the resurrection of Christ carries with it the resurrection of believers. Jesus said, 'I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live' (Jn. Xi. 25)... because God raised Christ He set His seal on the atoning work wrought out on the cross. He demonstrated His divine power in the face of sin and death, and at the same time His will to save men. Thus the resurrection of believers follows immediately from that of the Saviour'. (p.1088). *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. by J.D. Douglas et al. (London: The Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962).

loved one will be recuperated in heaven, through the clear-cut exchange of death for eternal life.

A second glance, however, reveals this biblical resolution to be inadequate to the demands of the poem. Mourning, to use Freud's terminology, is a process whereby the libido detaches itself from the lost object, 'bit by bit and at great expense of time and cathectic energy'.¹³ As we saw in the Introduction, according to Freud melancholia is the unsuccessful counterpart to mourning, whereby, 'the shadow of the object falls across the ego'. It is 'failed' mourning, where the ego cannot let go of the object and instead incorporates it into the self. Melancholia, then, is a form of inconsolable mourning which refuses to give up the attachment to the dead. If we read the poem's narrative of Christian consolation with Freud's description of melancholia in mind, it has an unsettling effect. While Christian doctrine offers a means of transcending mourning, it is a transcendence which is based on the promise that the dead one will be returned to the mourner through the eventual resurrection of the dead on Judgment Day, assuming that both mourner and beloved are true believers who will be allotted a place in Heaven. Thus, if melancholia is a form of 'failed' mourning, then Christian doctrine offers a flawed promise of transcendence. While it purports to be an apocalyptic end to mourning it is, rather, a symptom of mourning because it is based on the same structure of return. Or to put it another way, it is based on the same insistent wish for the restoration of the lost object, and it is this wish that betrays it *as* mourning.

¹³ Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p.245.

I suggested earlier that Piatt is deliberately criticising Christian consolation, yet what is it about this poem that suggests that this is in fact a deliberate, if covert, critique rather than, say, a conventional deployment of Christian teaching, albeit one which unwittingly reveals the unmasterable dilemma of mourning? We can begin to answer this when we consider the way in which Christianity is wedded to Confederate ideology in the poem. As we saw earlier, the apparition that appears to the mourner is not simply Christ but a composite figure made up of several identities, including the dead Confederate soldier. Implicitly then, the ghostly Christ is a Confederate Christ. We also saw how the speaker, despite her criticism of the ‘bitter cause’ of the Confederacy, is implicated in the identity of the ‘one’ who mourns and is thus, (however ambiguously) caught up in the fantasised return of this Confederate Christ. The very moment when Christianity seems to offer a way of transcending mourning through the return of the lost object, is also the moment when it becomes politicised. In a move that collapses the categories of the theological and the political, the one into the other - the South, as well as Christ, will rise again - the transcendent claim of Christianity lends itself to the Confederacy. The Christian doctrine of resurrection thus becomes part of the cycle of ‘feud’ violence that refuses to give up its attachment to the past (to the dead) and which insistently demands more deaths, more sacrifices.

Piatt, then, leaves the speaker in an ambiguous position that entails keeping a ‘tender Faith’, with Christ, with a dead lover, with the soldier and with a Confederacy that she simultaneously disavows and cherishes. The ambiguity of this final stanza is signaled by the invocation of faith, apparently a moment of closure,

which in fact marks the very impossibility of closure. On the one hand we are reminded of the close of *The Gates Ajar*, where Mary Cabot is left keeping faith, both literally, as the custodian of Winifred's child Faith, and in the sense that she is looking forward, with renewed religious faith, to the day when she will join her beloved brother and Aunt Winifred in heaven. On the other hand, Piatt, as we noted earlier, has done away with Winifred and the consolatory promise of a heavenly home. Yet neither does the poem seem to be endorsing the bland empiricism of the speaker's interlocutor in the final stanza, for whom the speaker's vision is 'Illusion' (line 38). To dismiss the appearance of the 'One' from the dead as merely a dream as the speaker's interlocutor does, is to deny the reality of mourning. Rather, the ambiguity of the speaker's position at the end of the poem seems to be a comment on the paradoxical nature of faith itself.

The speaker does not (cannot) deny the possibility that it is illusion and decides to 'let it be', to cling to her faith against the odds, or to put it another way, to have faith in faith. If faith emerges as a structural necessity in the face of death and loss, the poem seems to be exploring the limits of faith. Thus the poem seems to perform simultaneously an affirmation and a negation of faith, by exposing the contradiction inherent in religious belief and at the same time exploring the grounds for the possibility of that belief.

II

Suturing the Nation: Whitman and Stowe's Poetry of National Redemption.

In 'One From the Dead', Piatt explores the predicament of inconsolable mourning and exposes the way in which claims to transcendent truth turn out to be highly suspect. Without abandoning religious faith altogether, she manages nonetheless to scrutinise the way in which religion becomes wedded to ideology. Thus the notion of a final 'judgment-light' which would bring a halt to the interminable cycles of mourning – and to the ongoing ideological conflict between North and South – is problematised in her work. The complexity of Piatt's response to the war, and her wariness of notions of transcendent truth are closely linked to her identity as a Southerner. While being alienated from and highly critical of the South, she remained deeply invested in it. This enabled her to be sceptical of Southern patriotism (and racism, as we shall see in the next chapter), without simply siding with the North and disavowing her ties to the South. To identify so strongly with the losing side in the war made mourning far more problematic for Piatt. As we saw in the Introduction, the humiliation of defeat, coupled with the destruction of the South, meant that the benevolent spiritual world that Phelps invokes as a means of healing the crisis of the war was unavailable to Southerners.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's poem 'Consolation', was written after the Union defeat at the second battle of Bull Run in 1862.¹⁴ The poem epitomises precisely the kind of appeal to a transcendent divine order that Piatt holds up to scrutiny. Although Bull Run represented a setback for the North, it was far removed from the unequivocal loss that confronted Southerners in 1865. Certainly, far from counselling despair, Stowe implies that this defeat is a test of faith. She figures the war as a violent storm:

5 What is secure from the land-dashing wave?
 There go our riches, and our hopes fly there;
 There go the faces of our best beloved,
 Whelmed in the vortex of its wild despair.

Whose son is safe? whose brother, and whose home?
10 The dashing spray beats out the household fire;
By blackened ashes weep our widowed souls
Over the embers of our lost desire.

By pauses, in the fitful moaning storm,
We hear triumphant notes of battle roll.
15 Too soon the triumph sinks in funeral wail;
The muffled drum, the death march, shakes the soul!

Rocks on all sides, and breakers! At the helm
Weak human hand and weary human eyes.
The shout and clamor of our dreary strife
20 Goes up conflicting to the angry skies. (Stanzas 2-5)

In representing civil conflict as a natural disaster, Stowe implies that it is ordained by God rather than the product of conflicting interests and ideologies. She goes on:

But for all this, O timid hearts, be strong;
Be of good cheer, for, though the storm must be,
It hath its Master: from the depths shall rise
New heavens, new earth, where shall be no more sea. (Stanza 6)

¹⁴ The poem was published in, *Light After Darkness: Religious Poems*, Harriet Beecher Stowe, (London: Sampson Low, Son and Marston, 1867).

* * * * *

30 And war, and strife, and hatred, shall be past,
 And misery be a forgotten dream.
 The Shepherd God shall lead his peaceful fold
 By the calm meadows and the quiet stream.

 Be still, be still, and know that he is God;
 Be calm, be trustful; work and watch and pray,
 35 Till from the throes of this last anguish rise
 The light and gladness of that better day. (Stanzas 8-9)

The war is unavoidable, it ‘must be’, and this very inevitability signals that it is part of the divine plan. The epigraph to the poem is Revelation 21:1. ‘And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away: and there was no more sea’, and its presence implies that the Civil War is nothing less than apocalyptic, marking the end of the old order and the beginning of God’s kingdom on Earth. The poem makes no mention of death or the dead, but its purpose is clearly to offer consolation to those who sit ‘widowed’ by the empty hearth. If the war is part of the divine plan, then those who have died are instruments of this plan and have not, therefore, died in vain. The image of the shepherd leading his flock by the calm meadows and quiet stream is an allusion to Psalm 23, v.2, and reflects the fact that God, the benevolent shepherd, is overseeing all and will in the end bring things to a conclusion that is just and rightful. Unlike the speaker in Piatt’s ‘We Two’, who as we saw, refuses bitterly to be resigned to God’s will. Stowe appeals to the Bible to legitimise the war. The post-apocalyptic new heaven and new earth mark the end of ‘war, and strife, and hatred’ and, implicitly, the end of history itself. In contrast to Piatt, who exposes the way in which biblical myths of transcendence are conscripted into the services of a particular cause or ideology. Stowe is unselfconsciously engaged in depicting ideology – the moral rightness of the Union cause – as biblical truth.

Despite her partisanship of the Union cause, however, it is significant that Stowe refers to 'our' strife (line 19). 'Our' could of course refer to the North, but that would imply that the North, rather than the South was the cause of the war. Coming as it does directly after the reference to 'weak human hand and weary human eyes' (line 18), strife seems here to be an inevitable aspect of the fallen condition of humanity (which, conversely, God is working to rectify). This idea of 'our strife' seems also to refer to the strife of the American people, which anticipates the idea of national unity – we are at war amongst ourselves, but we are still a collective 'we'. The image of the empty hearth in stanza three, therefore applies to both Northern and Southern homes. War and loss thus become universal, a ground of common experience, which is potentially a nationalist, experiential ground. Similarly, via the image of the shepherd leading his 'peaceful fold/ By the calm meadows and the quiet stream' (lines 31-32), Stowe unites the biblical and the pastoral, in a move which anticipates Phelps's vision of a harmonious, pastoral landscape that will regenerate the physical and emotional damage wrought by the war. For Stowe, the war represents the working-out of God's plan on earth, a plan that will lead to a purified and unified America.

Walt Whitman's poetry also presents the war and its horrors as a ground of common experience for both North and South. Even the more aggressive poems in *Drum-Taps* (1865) dwell on the glory of 'a manly life in camp' ('First O Songs For A Prelude',¹⁵ line 49), and construct an energetic rhetoric in favour of the Union and Liberty, rather than vilifying the South. He figures the war as a family drama, for

¹⁵ First appeared in 1865 in *Drum-Taps*.

example in 'Virginia – The West',¹⁶ where he refers to Virginia as 'the noble sire fallen on evil days' (line 1). 'The Centenarian's Story'¹⁷ focuses on the reminiscences of a veteran of the War of Independence, as he stands and watches a regiment on parade, just before they leave for battle. The poem is set in Washington Park, Brooklyn, and the setting is significant because the centenarian fought on this very site in the Battle of Long Island, eighty-five years earlier. Whitman makes the tragic irony of the situation very plain. Under George Washington's generalship, a brigade of, 'the youngest men, two thousand strong, / Raised in Virginia and Maryland, and most of them known personally to the General' (lines 54-55), fought bravely against the British and were killed in defence of their country. Now, the Northern troops marching on this same site are preparing to slay the descendents of these heroes of the War of Independence. The Declaration of Independence plays a crucial role in the poem:

... I remember the Declaration,
 40 It was read here, the whole army paraded, it was read to us
 here,
 By his staff surrounded the General stood in the middle, he
 held up his unsheath'd sword,
 It glitter'd in the sun in full sight of the army.

Via the figure of Washington reading the Declaration, Whitman appeals to the spirit of the Revolution, a time when Americans joined together in comradeship against a common enemy. Rather than figuring the South as the villain, then, Whitman focuses on the ties that bind the two opposing sides together in a national kinship. The poem highlights the commonality rather than the differences between North and South, as

¹⁶ First published in *As A Strong Bird On Pinions Free*, 1872. Appeared in the 'final' 1881 version of *Drum-Taps*.

¹⁷ *Drum-Taps*, 1865.

though it aims to heal the breach by revealing the tragic irony of the Civil War. Yet it also participates, simultaneously, in precisely the kind of propaganda ploy that fuels the ideological rift between them. As Wynn Thomas points out, presenting the war as a murderous family drama enabled Whitman to discount Southern claims to independence and to make its 'rebellion' seem to be

... a betrayal of its own history and of that "true self" symbolized by Washington. This...of course...ran directly counter to the South's image of itself. Confederates specifically saw themselves as the true heirs of the Revolutionary tradition...' ¹⁸

Given the fact that soldiers from both Northern and Southern regions of America were killed in the war of Independence, it is ominous that the penultimate stanza of the poem dwells on the image of massed ranks of Southerners being cut down in battle:

105 The brigade of Virginia and Maryland have march'd forth
 to intercept the enemy,
 They are cut off, murderous artillery from the hills plays upon them,
 Rank after rank falls, while over them silently droops the
 flag,
 Baptized that day in many a young man's bloody wounds.
 In death, defeat, and sisters', mothers' tears.

This description emphasises the valour of the young Southern soldiers and hence heightens the dramatic irony of the Civil War – it is their blood, after all which has baptised the American flag. Yet the fact that it is young *Southern* men who are being massacred, and, presumably, Southern women who are weeping, also seems to be a veiled threat aimed at the South. Whitman is saying, in other words, if Southerners

¹⁸ Thomas, M. Wynn, 'Fratricide and Brotherly Love: Whitman and the Civil War', in *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*, edited by Ezra Greenspan, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp.27-44, (p.29).

take up arms against their countrymen, not only will they bring dishonour on their ancestors, they will also face defeat and wholesale destruction.

Whitman responds to Southern attempts to legitimise their Cause by mobilising a counter ideology, one which presents the Confederate Cause as a rebellion that runs counter to the Revolutionary spirit of those who fought under Washington. We can see, then, that in spite of his appeals to the historical ties that bind North and South together in a common kinship, his poetry is caught up in the repetitive and self-perpetuating cycles of 'feudal' violence that Piatt critiques in 'One From the Dead'. It is, after all, precisely these ties of kinship that are the precondition of a 'feud'.

While this feudal logic can be seen to inhabit Whitman's war poetry, there are moments in *Drum-Taps* when he seems to be overwhelmed by the threat of death and the horror around him, and self-consciously refuses to seek refuge in patriotic rhetoric. The most striking instance of this comes in 'The Wound Dresser'¹⁹, when the speaker says

(Arous'd and angry, I'd thought to beat the alarum, and urge
relentless war,
5 But soon my fingers fail'd me, my face droop'd and I
resign'd myself,
To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch
The dead;)

¹⁹ *Drum-Taps*, 1865.

Faced with the chaos and suffering caused by the war, Whitman's wound dresser makes his way through the hospitals, attempting to alleviate the suffering of the wounded as well as keeping watch over the dead and dying. These moments of witnessing in relation to the dead occur frequently in *Drum-Taps*, for example in 'Vigil Strange I kept on the Field One Night' and 'Reconciliation'. Whitman himself frequently became a surrogate mourner to the dead, recording their final words, watching over the body, and writing letters to their family with an account of the final moments of their loved one. As Wynn Thomas remarks, he was passionately determined to, 'record the achievement and sufferings of the "unknown" soldier and, wherever possible, to restore to those soldiers at least a trace of that personal identity that had almost been obliterated by the new techniques of mass warfare'.²⁰ By taking on the role of mourner in this way, Whitman attempts to counter the dreadful anonymity of death in battle. While he does not take consolation to quite the same literal extreme of heavenly re-embodiment that Phelps does, he is, like her, concerned with rehabilitating the dignity and identity of the dead.

Whitman's most famous poem of mourning in relation to the Civil War is his elegy for Abraham Lincoln, 'When Lilacs Last In The Dooryard Bloom'd'.²¹ Written in the weeks following Lincoln's assassination in April 1865, it is intended to be a nationally representative poem of mourning which preserves the nation's memory of their heroic leader. Yet in writing this poem, Whitman is as much concerned to inter

²⁰ M. Wynn Thomas, pp.35-36.

²¹ First appeared in *Sequel To Drum-Taps*, (1865-66)

certain aspects of the national memory as he is to preserve other aspects of it. As Timothy Sweet points out,

...his very choice of genre [the pastoral elegy] seems calculated to interdict certain aspects of national memory or history, especially as regards the war that was the context and the impetus for the assassination of Lincoln.²²

Certainly Whitman is determined to bring to a halt, once and for all, the battle between the competing ideologies of North and South. He presents Lincoln as a sacrificial figure, whose death is the price of national reunification. At the time, many people viewed his death in biblical terms, comparing him to Moses who lead his people out of slavery, and to Jesus, which allowed them to understand Lincoln's death in terms of the redemption of society.²³ While Whitman does not refer to the Bible explicitly, he presents Lincoln's death in mythic rather than historical terms. He describes, for instance, how the western star is hidden by the 'shades of night' (line 9) and how this same star presaged the assassination by 'droop[ing] from the sky low down as if to my side...' (line 59) a month before it happened. The image of the star being blotted out by darkness can be read as an allusion to the darkness that covered the sky at Christ's death. Turbulence in the heavens is also referred to a number of times in connection with the death of another great leader in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, for example in Calphurnia's remark that, '[t]he heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes'.²⁴

²² Sweet, p.68.

²³ For a discussion of Lincoln as a sacrificial figure, see Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Towards Death, 1799 -1883*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), p.162.

²⁴ *Julius Caesar*, Act 2, scene 2, line 31. Plutarch in his *Life of Julius Caesar*, which Shakespeare used as a source, refers to a 'great comet' appearing in the sky for seven nights after Caesar's murder and to the sun being blotted out. See Appendix, *Julius Caesar*, edited by David Daniell, (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2000), p.331.

Given its significance in relation to civil war, Whitman may well have had this play in mind when he wrote the poem. Either way, the star as heavenly portent implies that Lincoln's life has been sacrificed to a sacred cause and that his death is divinely sanctioned. The implication is that Lincoln's blood will sanctify the Union. Whitman reinforces this idea when he describes the coffin making its way across (Northern) America in the fifth and sixth stanzas:

Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities,
 Amid lanes and through old woods, where lately the violets
 peep'd from the ground, spotting the gray debris,
 Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing
 The endless grass,
 Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its
 shroud in the dark-brown field uprisen,
 30 Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the
 orchards,
 Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,
 Night and day journeys a coffin.

Coffin that passes through lanes and streets,
 Through day and night with the great cloud darkening the
 land,
 35 With the pomp of the inloop'd flags with the cities draped
 in black,
 With the show of the States themselves as of crape-veil'd
 women standing,
 With processions long and winding and the flambeaus of the
 night,
 With the countless torches lit, with the silent sea of faces
 and the unbared heads,
 With the waiting depot, the arriving coffin, and the sombre
 faces,
 40 With dirges through the night, with the thousand voices
 rising strong and solemn...

The effect of this is to evoke an image of the coffin threading its way through the landscape and suturing the nation together as it does so. Significantly, the violets are

covering over the 'gray debris', the wheat is rising up from its 'shroud' and the apple trees are full of blossom. This is a countryside that is positively bursting with fecundity and new life. In the cities, the crowds are mournful but they are united. The cloud darkening the land is reminiscent of Phelps's 'material miasma' of grief, although Whitman does not present it as choking off common human emotion. Although he situates mourning within a different framework from Phelps' evangelical Christianity, they both produce a similar democratisation of feeling as the basis for national reunion.

In addition to being a Christ-like figure, Lincoln becomes a synecdoche for all the war dead. As the speaker places a sprig of lilac on the coffin, he says, 'Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring... (line 47) and, '...[f]or you and the coffins all of you O Death' (line 54). The act of putting the sprig of lilac on the coffin is particularly significant given that so many of the dead did not have funerals. It is a symbolic laying to rest of all those who had died in the war. Here, death is not represented as bloody or violent, instead it is 'sane and sacred', which, again, transcends the historicity of the event, making Lincoln's death (and implicitly all war deaths) part of the cycle of things, ordained by God and nature, rather than being unnatural and untimely. Similarly, in the song of the hermit thrush (stanza 14) death is presented as a 'strong deliveress' (line 147) and the '[d]ark mother always gliding near with soft feet' (line 143), which has the effect of humanising it. Like Phelps, Whitman is undertaking the task of reintegrating death and grief into the community, or as Kerry

Larsen puts it, converting loss into 'socially redeemable capital'²⁵ although unlike Phelps he goes about it by creating a consolatory, secular fiction of death as a welcoming, maternal deliveress.

In the fifteenth stanza, Whitman does present us with a vision of death in battle, but the horror of death in battle is placed within a redemptive framework:

I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,
And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them,
I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the
war,
180 But I saw they were not as was thought,
They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer'd not.
The living remain'd and suffer'd, the mother suffer'd,
And the wife and the child and the musing comrade suffer'd,
And the armies that remain'd suffer'd.

The dead, Whitman argues, are past suffering, it is only the living who suffer. Here, as with the description of Lincoln's coffin passing across the country, suffering unites everyone, and this commonality of feeling implies a basis of national reunion or, more precisely, a Northern version of national reunion. The image of the 'white skeletons of young men' does evoke horror, but it also suggests that the bodies, undergoing a gradual process of decay, are being reabsorbed into the earth, literally becoming part of the American landscape. Thus the horror of recent history is effaced by the healing and restorative power of nature.

²⁵ Kerry C. Larson, *Whitman's Drama of Consensus*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p.242.

An idealised version of the American landscape is central to Whitman's vision of reunion. In stanza eleven, the speaker ponders the question of what to hang on the walls, to 'adorn the burial house of him I love' (line 80), and he decides to adorn it with a series of idealised images of American life:

Pictures of growing spring and farms and homes,
 With the Fourth-month eve at sundown, and the gray smoke
 Lucid and bright,
 With floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent,
 sinking sun, burning, expanding the air,
 With the fresh, sweet herbage under foot and the pale
 green leaves of the trees prolific,
 85 In the distance the flowing glaze, the breast of the river...

87 And the city at hand with dwellings so dense, and stacks of
 chimneys,
 And all the scenes of life and the workshops and the
 Workmen homeward returning.

He goes on in stanza twelve to include the South as well as the North in this vision of a fertile, pastoral landscape that coexists alongside the industrious cities. It is a countryside that suggests harmony and stability, inhabited by a unified, peaceful and productive community. Postbellum America, as Whitman represents it, has returned to a prewar state of innocence. It has become a secular garden of Eden, overseen by the transformative, healing power of the sun, whose radiance envelops 'man and land'. Appealing to the pastoral in this way enabled Whitman to efface the political and to present the Northern version of the national community as the 'true' and 'natural' version of America. Yet in deploying the pastoral, Whitman is nonetheless performing a political/ideological operation. Via this mode of representation, the ideology of the Union becomes normalised and naturalised – literally inscribed on the landscape. This

pastoral ideal was, of course, a crucial aspect of America's image of itself before the war, from Jefferson onwards. Whitman frequently turns to it in his own prewar writing, and it is therefore hardly surprising that he, along with writers like Stowe and Phelps, should draw on it in order, as Sweet puts it, to inscribe a 'recuperative... frame around the violence [after] the end of the war'.²⁶

While Whitman does not subscribe to the redemptive Christianity of Stowe and Phelps, his writing immediately after the war is remarkably similar to theirs in terms of what it sets out to do. All three appeal to the idea of sacrifice as a means of coming to terms with death in war, and they all turn to the pastoral as means of envisaging a redeemed and unified body politic, sanctioned by God or, in the case of Whitman, by a benevolent universal order of things. In an uncanny prefigurement of Freud's pronouncement during the first world war that, 'we shall build up again all that the war has destroyed, and perhaps on firmer ground and more lastingly than before',²⁷ these Northern writers set about the cultural and ideological work of suturing the country back together again. As a result, the contrast between their writing and Piatt's is stark. Where they portray the American landscape as a panoramic vista, and mourning as a teleological process that moves towards healing and resolution, Piatt confronts us with the stifling interior of a household in mourning and with the unnerving, enclosing effects of melancholic remembrance. Similarly, while many Northern writers presented the end of the war as the start of a new golden age and a return to a pre-fallen pastoral world, Piatt portrays the war as a devastating loss of

²⁶ Sweet, p.8.

²⁷ Freud, 'On Transience', p.290.

innocence while at the same time interrogating the myth of an idealised, Edenic, antebellum South. Equally, as a Southerner, she was especially sensitive to the way in which the North buried certain aspects of the war in the process of memorialising it. Bearing in mind how Stowe and Whitman memorialise the war in their poetry, I will now move on to explore Piatt's writing in relation to public memory, beginning with a discussion of Lyotard's theorisation of how the public memorial functions.

III

'I Want The Old War Back Again': Piatt and the Poetics of Public Memory.

...if "those who ignore the past are doomed to repeat it," simply remembering the past – at least a certain form of memorializing memory – is not itself a guarantee that the worst forms of injustice and devastation of the past will not be repeated in some form or other... Memory in itself guarantees nothing; it all depends on what kind of memory and how. within memory, one goes about combating the revenge the memory of injustice often calls for.²⁸

As the quotation above suggests, public memorials are never as straightforwardly transparent as they might seem. As the site where the past comes to exert a living influence over the present, public memorialisation is a collective process of remembering as well as forgetting, which generates the 'meaning' of significant

²⁸ From David Carroll's Foreword to *Heidegger and "the jews"*, Jean-Francois Lyotard, trans. by Andreas Michel and Mark S. Roberts (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1990), pp.vii-xxix. (p.ix).

events and determines the ways in which they shape national identity. Lyotard argues in *Heidegger and the "jews"* that

...as far as forgetting is concerned, this memory of the memorial is intensely selective; it requires the forgetting of that which may question the community and its legitimacy. This is not to say that memory does not address this problem, quite the contrary. It represents, may and must represent, tyranny, discord, civil war, the mutual sharing of shame, and conflicts born of rage and hate. It can and must represent war and *stasis* in a discourse (taken here in the larger sense, i.e. it might be a monument) that, because of the single representation it makes of them, "surmounts" them... As re-presentation it is necessarily a sublation (*re-leve*), an elevation (*elevation*) that enthralls and removes (*enleve*). We might say in today's idiom: an elevation that wraps up...in both senses of the word: every politicization implies this getting all wrapped up in something (*emballement*) that is also a being wrapped up, packaged (*emballage*) this elevation that is an enthrallment and a removal (*enlevement*).

Following Freud it is necessary to say a little more about this: if there is cause for getting all wrapped up, it is because there is something to wrap up, something that gives rise to being wrapped up, packaged. One elevates because one must enthrall/remove. The pain brought on by shame and doubt generates the edification of the worthy, the certain, the noble, and the just.²⁹

Public memory then, as Lyotard characterises it, is a form of selective remembering that seeks to obscure its own origins. It seeks, in other words, to 'package' and make palatable the unpalatable realities of sectional hatred, bitterness and the desire for revenge. And it does so by elevating a single truth, or reality, which comes to stand for the 'meaning' of the event. Thus, as we saw in the previous section, Whitman appeals to the pastoral in order to facilitate an idealised image of national reunion, while Stowe and Phelps turn to the Bible, which enables them to represent Union ideology as divine truth. This process of selective remembering is also apparent in the public rituals of remembrance that took place in the years following the American Civil War, the most important of which was 'Decoration Day'.

²⁹ Lyotard, pp7-8.

‘Decoration Day’ or ‘Memorial Day’, as it was eventually called, officially came to be known as a Northern ritual of commemoration in May 1868 and 1869.³⁰ As the historian David Blight describes, it was the occasion for ‘endless expressions of joyous death on the altars of national survival’:

In the Christian cosmology and the apocalyptic sense of history through which many Americans, white and black, interpreted the scale of death in the war, Memorial Day provided a means to achieve both spiritual recovery and historical understanding. In the cult of the fallen soldier, a nineteenth-century manly ideal of heroism was redefined for coming generations. And in a thousand variations, the Union dead – and soon the Confederate dead with them – served as saviors and founders, the agents of the death of an old social order and birth of a new one. Memorial Day became a legitimising ritual of the new American nationalism forged out of the war.³¹

Clearly, for a nation struggling to come to terms with death on such a massive scale, the need for a rhetoric of national survival and recovery was very great, but for all the talk of heroism and martyrs, the meaning of the Civil War, once it was over, was far from settled, as we saw in ‘One from the Dead’. As Blight points out,

...remembering the dead and what they died for developed partisan fault lines...With time, in the North, the war’s two great results – black freedom and

³⁰ Memorial Day, as a national ritual of commemoration was also observed in the South. The founding of ‘Decoration Day’ actually took place in Charleston, South Carolina on May 1st 1865 and involved nearly ten thousand people, the majority of whom were former slaves. The memory of this first observance of the ritual, however, was suppressed by white Southerners. It is a suppression which echoes the way in which the Northern discourse which celebrated the overthrow of the ‘evil’ of slavery in the years immediately following the war was gradually overtaken by the rhetoric of reunion between North and South which celebrated the ties between white Northerners and Southerners at the expense of the interests and rights of African-Americans. For a discussion of the first Decoration Day, see David Blight, *Race and Reunion; The Civil War in American Memory*, (Cambridge Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), pp 65-71.

³¹ Blight, p.72

the preservation of the Union – were rarely accorded equal status. In the South, a uniquely Confederate version of the war's meaning, rooted in resistance to Reconstruction, coalesced around Memorial Day practice.³²

Heroic sacrifice of life for the sake of the Union may have emerged as the dominant narrative that shaped the nation's understanding of the war, yet this was at the cost of repressing the uncomfortable reality of the war and the consequences of the devastation it had wrought in the South. Bearing in mind Lyotard's idea of the public memorial as a form of selective remembering - one which seeks to 'wrap up' (both re-packaging and bringing closure to) the pain and the complexity of an event such as the Civil War - I want to consider how Piatt's poetic language functions as a way of undoing (or unwrapping) the univocality of the public memorial. If 'memorialising memory', as Carroll calls it, seeks to surmount the difficulty and complexity of the Civil War by reducing it to a 'single representation' in which the 'truth' of the war can be essentialised, then I want to suggest that Piatt's privileging of uncertainty and instability - the densely-textured, 'enigmatic' quality of her verse – seems to demand a working-through of the problems of representation and remembering in relation to the Civil War.

Piatt's 1866 poem 'Army of Occupation', was written to commemorate the sealing of the mass grave of over two thousand unknown Union soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery. It provides a striking example of the way in which the graveyard was a crucial site in the discourse of public memory through which the meaning of the war was forged in the years immediately following the conflict. At first glance the

³² Blight, p.65.

poem seems to be an elegy for the thousands of war dead, one that places the blame for their deaths squarely on the shoulders of the ghostlike figure of Lee who stands ‘chilled and oppressed’ before his own hearth, impaled on his rusted sword (lines 27-30). Yet Piatt is doing more here than simply apportioning blame for the war. Rather, the very act of apportioning blame is precisely the subject of the poem.

Elegy, as Peter Sacks describes, ‘follows the ancient rites in the basic pattern through grief and darkness to consolation and renewal’.³³ As we saw in the previous section, Whitman’s ‘When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d’ exemplifies this trajectory, and ostensibly Piatt’s poem appears to do so as well. The reference to the ‘sleeping army’ (line 6) suggests that death is merely a peaceful sleep for the Union dead. Just like the war dead in Whitman’s poem, they are beyond suffering (‘Lilacs’, line 181). In stanza four (lines 18-20), the speaker appears to be asserting rhetorically that, ‘...if the country should be calling to her men,’ the spirit of the Union dead will be re-awakened to imbue succeeding generations with their courage on the battlefield. There is also a sense, at least in the first four stanzas of the poem, that nature is going about its redemptive work. The first stanza presents us with an idyllic, pastoral setting:

The summer blew its little drifts of sound –
 Tangled with wet leaf-shadows and the light
 Small breath of scattered morning buds – around
 The yellow path through which our footsteps wound.
 5 Below, the Capitol rose glittering white.

³³ Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985) p.20.

The implication seems to be that after the violence of the war, America is transformed into a pastoral landscape over which the Capitol, symbol of the restored political edifice of the Union, rises serenely, 'glittering white'. Following this, in the third stanza, the speaker invokes an elegiac mood which conscripts nature to join in mourning the war dead, 'Wear flowers for such, shores whence their feet did pass:/ Sing tenderly; O river's haunted flood' (lines 14-15). The tenderness, even lyricism of these lines suggests that nature will recuperate the damage done to the nation by civil conflict.

Yet elsewhere in the poem there are moments that jar with this sense of pastoral serenity and disrupt the movement from grief to consolation that we would normally expect to find in elegy. In stanza five the speaker describes the mourners who have come to view the mass grave:

Around them underneath the mid-day skies
The dreadful phantoms of the living walk,
And by low moons and darkness with their cries –
The mothers, sisters, wives with faded eyes,
25 Who call still names amid their broken talk.

Here there is a sense of dissonance between the sunny mid-day skies and the 'dreadful phantoms' of the mourners. Similarly, the eerie image of the mourning women calling to the dead at night suggests a desolate, haunted landscape closer to the gothic than the pastoral. Certainly, the scene contrasts sharply with the sixth stanza of Whitman's poem, where the crowds who mourn Lincoln are united and purposeful, 'the thousand voices rising strong and solemn' (Lilacs, line 40). It is also striking that

in Piatt's poem, the living themselves become phantoms. Sacks describes how, 'few elegies or acts of mourning succeed without seeming to place the dead, and death itself at some cleared distance from the living'.³⁴ Yet the description of the living *as* phantoms displaces and even blurs this boundary between the living and the dead. So too does the spectral figure of the still-living Lee in the final stanza:

And there is one who comes alone and stands
At his dim fireless hearth – chill'd and oppress'd
By Something he has summon'd to his lands,
While the weird pallor of its many hands
30 Points to his rusted sword in his own breast!

It becomes hard at this point to tell whether the hands that point at Lee are those of the dead, or the living, or both. And why, if Piatt is intending to write a poem of consolation, does it conclude so disturbingly, with an image of ghostly condemnation that suggests a public crucifixion without any accompanying redemption?

In the first four stanzas of the poem, Piatt seduces us into seeing nature as redemptive and Edenic. Inhabiting the voice of elegy, Piatt's speaker appropriates nature so that it becomes a monument to the dead, 'wearing flowers' for them and singing 'tenderly' of their loss (lines 14-15). As in Whitman's elegy, nature appears to offer a place of pastoral retreat from which to contemplate the man-made horror of war and to come to terms with it. Yet this is disrupted, not only by the disturbing images of the mourners in the penultimate stanza, but also by the reference to the possibility of another war in stanza four:

³⁴ Sacks, p.19.

Yet if, in some red-clouded dawn, again
 The country should be calling to her men,
 20 Shall the reveille not remember these?

Nature, it seems, can just as easily be appropriated for the purposes of calling men to war as it can for mourning them afterwards. Similarly, while, 'Shall the reveille not remember these?' can be read as a prophetic assertion of the reawakening of the heroism of the dead in future wars, it can also be read as a comment on the inevitability of future deaths in battle. In other words, at some future moment when the military bugle call sounds to summon men to fight, could the memory of the deaths of so many prevent another war? By raising the possibility of other, future battles, the speaker suggests that, inevitably, the horror of this war will be forgotten.

The poem, then, seems to be working backwards. It moves from the consolatory voice of elegy towards the disturbing images of mourning and accusation in the final two stanzas, and in doing so deprives us of a sense of closure or healing. We might expect, for example, that the poem would conclude with the optimistic, 'glittering white' image of the Capitol, rather than with the spectre of General Lee. As we saw earlier, the poem could be read as simply blaming Lee for the war. The image of him with his sword in his breast seems to be an admission on Lee's part of his own culpability, suggesting the military codes of Roman antiquity whereby the honourable way out of defeat or disgrace was to commit suicide by falling on one's sword. Piatt, however, does not seem to be blaming Lee, rather he emerges neither as hero or villain but as someone who has lost control of the situation. The image of him with his sword in his breast is a pathetic one and has the effect of distancing us from the crowd which

points so accusingly at this forlorn figure. Yet Piatt's critique of war and militaristic rhetoric in the poem and her scepticism about military leaders in general (for example in, 'Shoulder Rank') make it highly unlikely that she is valuing Lee as a tragic hero.

The question remains, though, as to who or what exactly it is that he has summoned and which points at him in accusation. As we noted, it is difficult to tell the difference at this point between the living and the dead. The unsettling image of the ghostly hands that point at him in condemnation appear to be those both of the war dead and the living mourners. Piatt is deliberately making it difficult for us to align ourselves with this act of blaming. Indeed the act of blaming, of pointing the finger, seems, literally, to entail a condition of spectrality, of ghostliness, as though the taking up of this position is to identify with the dead.

It is also significant that the 'Something' which he has summoned is capitalised. While it follows syntactically that this 'Something' applies to the war dead and the army of mourners, the capitalisation transforms it into a transcendent term that exceeds the control of individuals. This idea of blaming as a collective act – an undifferentiated crowd of ghostly hands pointing - echoes the earlier description of war in stanza three (lines 11-13):

They saw the dust, they joined the moving mass,
They answer'd the fierce music's cry for blood,
Then straggled here and lay down in the grass...

To go to war is to be caught up in a 'moving mass' and to answer a 'fierce cry for blood'. War, here, seems to amount to a collective handing over of responsibility, whereby individual judgement (and self-preservation) is subsumed by the demands of patriotism. The poem, as we saw, also anticipates the possibility of another war if 'the country should be calling to her men' in future. If going to war is a surrendering of personal responsibility to patriotic fervour, then Piatt is suggesting that it is not enough to blame Lee for 'summoning' war to his lands, when in fact those aspects of human nature that made the war inevitable – bloodlust, tribalism, the appeal of being swept up in a larger cause – were already there to start with.

When we bear in mind Piatt's characterisation of war as a collective handing over of responsibility, it becomes possible to take Lyotard's insights about the public memorial a little further. While Piatt recognises that 'memorialising memory,' as Lyotard puts it, entails a refusal to acknowledge anything that 'may question the community and its legitimacy', she also goes a step beyond this in recognising that war itself functions on the same principle. Thus the act of selective remembering and forgetting which memorialising memory entails repeats the dynamic of war, whereby individual judgment is subsumed into the cause that is being supported. It is clearly not the case, though, that the poem lacks sympathy for the war dead. Rather it seems that Piatt is probing the collective psyche and the way in which the war is viewed in the public mind. She takes a step back, as it were, and explores the way in which a particular narrative of the war is emerging in 1866. Certainly, the pastoral imagery in the poem suggests a narrative of healing and restoration, whereby the war dead are

viewed as heroes who, as Blight puts it, 'served as saviors and founders', defending and restoring an idyllic American republic. Yet for the mourners in Piatt's poem, victory itself seems to be a kind of loss. Ultimately, what Piatt is doing is offering a criticism of public memory by tracing the way that, beneath the publicly acceptable packaging and 'elevation' of the war, public memory is fuelled by private loss and the need for revenge. Piatt makes visible the way in which the dead exert a living influence on the present through the public memorial: thus the army of bereaved seeks consolation through the act of blaming the South. And the image of Lee, impaled on his sword before his accusers, reflects the way in which, immediately after the war, the South was being called to account by the North for the sin of rebellion.

Piatt, then, allows us to extend and complicate Lyotard's critique of the public memorial as a form of selective representation that 'forgets' the complexity of war. Thus in 'Army of Occupation' public memorialisation of the Union dead emerges as a blind repetition of the selective, blinkered vision – that suspension of individual critical judgment in favour of patriotism – which war requires, so that the memorial itself becomes a symptom of war. Piatt's 1872 poem, 'Another War', addresses much more explicitly the way in which the individual becomes 'wrapped up in', and surrenders to, the demands of war. The poem functions as a meditation on war by exploring the speaker's response (in peacetime) to a procession of soldiers.

The poem opens with a conversation between an adult and child as they watch the soldiers marching past:

Yes, they are coming from the fort-
 Not weary they, nor dimmed with dust;
 Their march seems but a shining sport,
 Their swords too new for rust.

5 You think the captains look so fine,
 You like, I know, the long sharp flash,
 The fair silk flags above the line,
 The pretty scarlet sash?

You like the horses when they neigh,
 10 You like the music most of all,
 And, if they had to fight to-day,
 You'd like to see them fall.

I wisely think their uniform
 Was made for skeletons to wear,
 15 But your young blood is quick and warm,
 And so – you do not care.

You lift your eager eyes and ask:
 “Could we not have another war?”
 As I might give this fearful task
 20 To armies near and far.

Another war? Perhaps we could,
 Yet, child of mine with sunniest head,
 I sometimes wonder if I would
 Bear then to see the dead!

The first six stanzas set up a contrast between the child's naive enthusiasm for the soldiers and the speaker's adult scepticism about this spectacle of military prowess. To the child, unaware of the realities of violence and death, war is merely a 'shining sport' (line 3) and if the soldiers had to fight he would, with callous innocence, 'like to see them fall' (line 12). For the speaker, though, the sight of the soldiers is far more troubling. She (or he), having already witnessed – or perhaps fought in - a war, is all too aware of the grim reality of the battlefield and is not seduced by the splendour and

apparent invulnerability of the soldiers. In contrast to the child, the speaker possesses a critical distance from this display of military prowess and is well aware of the cost of another war in terms of having to 'bear...to see the dead' (line 24). This suggests that it is possible to resist the surrendering of critical judgment in the face of militarism and patriotism and to take a stance whereby the memory of the dead can be invoked to resist the temptation of another war, instead of becoming a motive for revenge that drives the next generation into battle.

Yet the speaker's critical stance is exceeded by the problem of the individual's investment in war. The first stanza hinges on the word 'seems' (line 3), foregrounding the way in which the soldiers' march is a public display, an act of 'seeming' which conceals the weariness and grimy reality of war. War as spectacle, then, is alluring and the child is seduced because he is meant to be; his naivete and lack of experience allows him to be corrupted by (and conscripted into) the idea of military glory. Similarly, in stanza seven the speaker remarks, '...see,/ My pretty boy follows the men', which again suggests that the child is already lost to militaristic ideology. 'Follows' here indicates that the child is gazing after the soldiers and also seems to be prefigure the child himself becoming a soldier and joining the procession. Thus the child is, if not literally recruited into the ranks of the army, certainly interpellated in Althusser's sense of the word into military ideology.³⁵

³⁵ See Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and the State', in, *Modern Literary Theory, A Reader*, edited by Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh, (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), p.60.

In stanzas seven to nine, the speaker's scepticism towards war is further troubled:

25 But am I in a dream? For see,
My pretty boy follows the men-
Surely he did not speak to me,
Who could have spoken, then?

It was another child, less fair,
30 Less young, less innocent, I know,
Who lost the light gold from its hair
Most bitter years ago!

It was that restless, wavering child
I call Myself. No other, dear.
35 Perhaps you knew it when you smiled
Because none else was near.

Here there emerges a child self that is buried within the adult speaker and which wants to wage 'another war'. The child self seems to be at once alien and removed from the speaker's adult self, yet nonetheless recognisable and familiar to her. For the speaker to call it 'Myself' is to acknowledge that it is part of her identity, and also suggests that the subjectivity of the speaker is unstable and divided. It is significant that although this child self is invested in the war, in direct opposition to the speaker's adult, critical self, the speaker does not simply try to disavow it or deny its existence. In recognising it *as* herself, she moves on in the final three stanzas to explore why this child has suddenly spoken:

Then not my boy, it seems, but I
Would wage another war? – To see
The shining sights, to hear the cry
40 Of ghastly victory?

No – for another war could bring
 No second bloom to wither'd flowers,
 No second song to birds that sing,
 Lost tunes in other hours!

45 But, friend, since time is full of pain,
 Whether men fall by field or hearth,
 I want the old war back again,
 And nothing new on earth!

(Stanzas 10-12)

Ostensibly the speaker's desire for war is not merely because she is caught up in military ideology in the way that her son is. She does not want another war '...to see/ The shining sights, to hear the cry of ghastly victory'. Why then does she want it? In the eleventh stanza the speaker acknowledges that another war could not bring back the past: could not, in other words, restore what was lost in the first war. Yet in the closing stanza the speaker reiterates the wish for another war and seems to abdicate responsibility: '...since time is full of pain/Whether men fall by field or hearth/I want the old war back again, /And nothing new on earth'. What are we to make of this final statement? Is it a nihilistic endorsement of war, and is the poem abandoning critical judgment and ethics in favour of a nostalgic craving for the return of the past, no matter what the cost?

The problem is that the speaker appears to be prepared to 'wage another war' – she would be prepared to live through the war again – so that her pain could be erased. In the final stanza, 'field' and 'hearth' are being brought together as symbols of war and peacetime, and the common denominator which links them is death. 'Pain' and 'war' also seem at this point to be working strategically, so that the 'pain' which the speaker describes is not merely pain as a contingent factor of life ('*whether* men fall

by field or hearth') but the pain of loss that is brought about by death: the pain which is a general condition of mortality. This pain of mortality is present regardless of whether one lives in a time of peace or a time of war. It is also this trauma of loss and death that marks out war *as* war. 'War' at this point, then, seems to represent the horror of death on a magnified scale. Thus 'war' is being used strategically to represent the general condition of mortality writ large.

In the penultimate stanza the flowers and birdsong that the speaker refers to, appear to belong to an Edenic, pre-war past that the speaker wishes to return to but which is now inaccessible. Another war, she tells us, 'could bring/ No second bloom to wither'd flowers,/ No second song to birds that sing./ Lost tunes in other hours' (lines 41-44). The nostalgic pessimism of these lines, while conceding that the past is inaccessible, nevertheless presupposes that the past is a 'better' place than the present. But we need to be cautious about reading this simply as a desire for an idealised antebellum South. If we bear in mind that the speaker then goes on to tell us that death is present in peace and wartime alike, then the elusive and idealised first 'bloom' of the past – the bloom that the speaker wants to restore – is radically undercut. The 'old war' – the war with mortality – was already present in the antebellum past.

The poem presents us, then, with a speaker who clings to the past and who appears to be endorsing another war, despite the fact that she is well aware of the consequences of war. Yet to condemn the speaker for her selfishness is to ignore the fact that all along the poem has been presenting us with an 'I' who is divided: 'I

wisely think' (line 13) suggests that the speaker is distanced from her 'wise' adult persona. Similarly, the speaker's comment, 'It was that restless, wavering child: I call Myself' (lines 33-34) suggests a distance from the capricious, childlike self who desires another war, while at the same time there is a claiming of that self, a recognition of it as part of the speaker's identity. Each perspective – each self – thus belongs and does not belong to the speaker. In this way, neither nostalgic pessimism nor the radical undercutting of it is allowed to dominate. Rather, the two perspectives remain in a tension with one another that the poem refuses to resolve. In a manner with which we are familiar from 'One from the Dead', the speaker attempts to resolve this tension through an appeal to biblical authority. Her final comment that she wants the old war back and 'nothing new on earth' (line 48) echoes a passage in Ecclesiastes:

The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.³⁶

The biblical quotation certainly suggests the futility of anything 'new' in the future. If there is indeed nothing 'new', and if there is not likely to be, then the citation might seem to endorse the pessimistic viewpoint that takes refuge in an idealised past: 'I want the old war back again and nothing new on earth'. But Piatt has after all already signalled that 'war' in this poem is not only being used to refer to a specific war, it also refers to the general condition of mortality. Thus this biblical 'nothing new' of the future – the nothing new that will come - begins to sound like a 'nothing new' that has always been – a bloom that has always been lost, a South that was never an Eden. This final gesture of closure attempts to resolve the speaker into a unified whole but in fact

³⁶ Ecclesiastes, Chapter 1 verse 9. King James Bible.

ends by replicating the self-division that has emerged in the poem. Far from closing down this tension, the biblical quote allows the parallel articulation of the speaker's conflicting perspectives such that it becomes impossible even to speak of 'the speaker' any more – rather she seems to disappear into a conflict of selves.

Thus, like 'Army of Occupation', 'Another War' dramatises the division of the self and the surrendering of personal responsibility to a larger cause. We saw in 'Army of Occupation' how the public memorial repeats the dynamic of war, whereby individual judgment is subsumed into the cause that is being supported. Thus to join the 'moving mass' in going to war is repeated in the final collective act of vengeance where the finger of blame for the war is pointed at Lee and thus directed away from any questioning of the community itself or its legitimacy. Similarly, 'Another War' reveals the way in which war makes its appeal to the divided nature of subjectivity. The drama of 'Another War' lies in the fact that neither of the conflicting selves wins out in the end. The 'wavering' child that wants another war and a return to the Old South exists in a continuing tension with the adult who resists the temptation to idealise the Old South, knowing that death has always been in the world. To endorse another war would entail a giving up of this self: the self that hesitates when confronted with the marching soldiers and examines its own motives instead of becoming caught up in the public spectacle of military power. Piatt thus presents the reader with the challenge of how to read the poem. To read it as no more than a surrender of responsibility – to ignore the adult self whose voice is not excluded even

in the poem's final two lines – is to perform as a reader the rejection of responsibility which the child self enacts.

In 'Another War', Piatt presents subjectivity as being divided rather than stable and unified, and this has significant implications for the idea of national identity. Piatt shows in her poetry, in other words, that unity at either an individual or a national level is simply not possible, which runs counter to the redemptive narrative of a unified body politic which we encounter in the work of Northern writers like Whitman and Stowe. In 'One From the Dead', the scene of melancholic remembrance in the home of the Confederate soldier reflects the way in which Southerners were unable simply to give up all that had been lost and embrace the new national unity which Whitman celebrates. Similarly, the images of the desolate landscape peopled with mourners in 'Army Of Occupation', suggest that even though the Union dead may be buried, their survivors will remain haunted. Lyotard, as we have seen, argues that in order to legitimate itself, the community has to bury certain aspects of the past that threaten to disrupt and destabilise it, but the cost of this, as Piatt shows, is that it continues to be haunted by them. One of the most troubling and enduring of these spectres is that of slavery, and I will now move on to explore the ways in which it is addressed in Piatt's poetry.

Chapter Three

“The Slave of Slavery”: Race and Reconstruction .

I

Southern Women and Race: Sarah Piatt and Mary Chestnut.

Forgiveness is indifference. Forgiveness is impossible while *love lasts*.

Make no deep scrutiny

Into our mutiny –

Mary Boykin Chestnut, July 1865.¹

Mary Chestnut wrote these lines barely three months after Lee's surrender at Appomattox, as she looked on in fear and dismay at the effects of Confederate defeat in the South. The notion of 'forgiveness' in this context seems to apply in a number of different ways – Southerners' forgiveness of the Yankees for the mistreatment frequently dealt out to them by the conquering army (Chestnut's diary is full of indignant references to instances of Yankee brutality against Southern women), and forgiveness for the destruction that the North had wreaked on the South. Forgiveness, ultimately, for the harsh reality of Southern defeat and the poverty, insecurity and humiliation that white Southerners faced after the war. Unsurprisingly, Chestnut is

¹ Mary Chestnut, *Mary Chestnut's Civil War*, ed. by C.Vann Woodward (New Haven: Yale University Press 1981), p.836.

extremely sceptical about the notion of forgiveness as such, implying that it can come about only when one relinquishes one's stake in the situation, which was clearly not something that white Southerners were about to do. Appealing to the idea of forgiveness was thus not likely to offer a means of repairing the devastation in the South, as Chestnut correctly surmises.

This does not, however, prevent her from making her own coded plea for Northern forgiveness of Southern 'mutiny', in her allusion to Thomas Hood's 1844 poem, 'The Bridge of Sighs'. Hood's text makes an appeal for compassion and absolution on behalf of a fallen woman found drowned: 'Make no deep scrutiny/Into her mutiny/Rash and undutiful:/Past all dishonour, /Death has left on her /Only the beautiful.'² In referring to the poem in relation to the defeated South, Chestnut anticipates all the pathos and patriotism of the Lost Cause ideology that began to take shape in the years immediately following the war.

A chief ingredient of this ideology was the idea that Southerners had fought gallantly to protect their rights against federal tyranny and were in the end overcome by superior industrial might and weight of numbers on the Northern side. By the 1880's, when the bitterness of the immediate postwar years had begun to fade, the myth of the Southern Lost Cause was gaining immense currency in the North and played a key role in forging reunion between North and South. David Blight comments on the way in which Ulysses Grant's account of the war in his *Memoirs*

² Chestnut is quoting from stanza five of the poem. See Valentine Cunningham, ed, *The Victorians: An Anthology of Poetry and Poetics*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp.65-66.

(which became a bestseller when it was published in 1885) epitomised the feeling on both sides of

...shared grief at war's costs coupled with Northern respect for the *sincerity* of Southern devotion to their cause, even when that cause was judged repugnant. The war was drained of evil, and to a great extent, of cause and political meaning. A politics of forgetting attached itself readily to the Union hero's depiction of two mystic days at Appomattox where Grant and Lee, the plebian and the aristocrat, met "cordially" in "very pleasant conversation". The reunion was a consummation forged out of soldier's dignity – the blessed peace, surpassing politics, that Grant had driven Lee to help him forge at Appomattox.³

We saw in the previous chapter how the public memorial functions as a form of selective remembering that elevates a particular version of an event while seeking to forget its more troubling, uncomfortable realities. As Blight points out, a crucial element of the Lost Cause myth is the way in which it enabled the coming-together of former enemies through a mutual 'politics of forgetting'. By representing the war as a drama between whites, Lost Cause ideology managed to evade the issue of slavery and black emancipation. Chestnut's diary, for example, leaves one with the impression that it is white Southerners who are the oppressed people rather than the newly emancipated slaves. About blacks themselves Chestnut is extremely ambivalent, 'I am always studying these creatures', she says at one point, 'they are inscrutable in their ways and past finding out.'⁴ There are several moments when Chestnut comments with relief on the loyalty of her own slaves, despite the turmoil of the war, but this relief is frequently underpinned by a nagging uncertainty, particularly towards the end of the war; 'Not by one word or look do these slaves show that they know Sherman

³ Blight, p.215.

⁴ Chestnut, p.114.

and freedom is at hand. They are more obedient and more considerate than ever – to me.’⁵ Much as she seeks to decipher reassuring signs of fidelity and gratitude in her black servants, Chestnut can never quite shed her awareness that in attempting to ‘study’ black faces, she is always liable to misread them. The certainty that she craves – the desire to *know* beyond a shadow of doubt what her slaves are really thinking behind ‘their black masks’⁶ consistently eludes her.

While Chestnut struggled to decipher the enigmatic ‘masks’ of her servants, Sarah Piatt was already exiled from the South and living in Ohio. That Piatt left the South while Chestnut remained marks a crucial difference between these two writers whose backgrounds are in many ways very similar. Like Piatt, Chestnut came from an ‘old family’ of well-to-do planters who owned a large number of slaves. Born in South Carolina in 1823, she was thirteen years older than Piatt. When war broke out she was already married to James Chestnut, the only surviving son of one of the wealthiest planters in South Carolina. At the time of their marriage in 1840, James Chestnut was a promising young lawyer, and he was later elected to the United States Senate in 1858. Politically he was a moderate rather than a radical advocate of states’ rights, but when Lincoln became president James Chestnut resigned from the Senate and wholeheartedly threw himself into the Confederate cause. Although she also supported the Confederacy, Mary Chestnut was scathing about slavery in her diary, famously referring to it as ‘a *monstrous* system and wrong and iniquity’.⁷ As recent critics have noted, Chestnut’s chief reason for objecting to the institution of slavery was not

⁵ Chestnut, p.699.

⁶ Chestnut, p.464.

⁷ Chestnut, p.29.

humanitarian; her sense of outrage stemmed rather from the humiliation experienced by the white wives of plantation owners, forced to live 'surrounded by prostitutes'⁸ and by their husbands' illegitimate offspring.⁹

Piatt's poetry, like Chestnut's diary, reflects the complex relationship between Southern white women and the slaves who surrounded them. While I do not intend in this chapter to produce a comparative reading between Mary Chestnut and Sarah Piatt, I want to unpack the epigraph to this chapter, taken from Chestnut's diary, in order to think about the tensions in Piatt's own writing between love and hatred, blackness and whiteness, North and South. The impossibility of 'forgiveness', for Chestnut, pertains to that between North and South, in other words between whites. In the end this reconciliation, 'the blessed peace surpassing politics', as Blight terms it with heavy irony, was purchased at the expense of burying the issue of the oppression of blacks. Grant's depiction of his meeting with Lee at Appomattox envisages reunion as a strictly white affair, facilitated by men of honour on both sides. The cost of this was a denial of the reality of slavery by the South and, by the 1880's, the North as well.

This disavowal of the brutality of slavery is particularly glaring in the popular genre of writing known as Southern plantation fiction. During the 1880's and 90's, demand for highly romanticised stories of plantation life was immense. A key ingredient in this representation of the South was the portrayal of slavery as a

⁸ Chestnut, p.29.

⁹ Neil Schmitz, for example, berates Chestnut for not seeing '...the self-centredness of her antislavery position', See Neil Schmitz, 'Mark Twain's Civil War: Humour's Reconstructive Writing', in *The Cambridge Companion to Mark Twain*, ed. by Forrest G. Robinson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995), pp.74-92, (p.76).

benevolent institution and black people as happy darkies; ignorant, lazy, obsequious and essentially contented with their lot. In its avoidance of the reality of slavery, plantation fiction reflects the increasingly conciliatory mood between North and South and the way in which, now that it was safely in the past, the North was prepared to buy into a retelling of history which emphasised the chivalric virtue of Southern culture and the nobility of its cause. Forgiveness between Northern and Southern whites was thus closely bound up with a mutual rewriting of the Old South based on a mythologised version of slavery and a distorted representation of black people.¹⁰ Similarly, this 'forgiveness', the letting go of old animosities, is accompanied on both sides by a peculiar fascination with the past rather than 'indifference' to it.

Southerners' idealised accounts of slavery, then, were a form of propaganda for the South and a means of asserting white superiority. In fact, the idealised rewriting of slavery that developed after the war seems in many ways to operate like Lyotard's idea of the public memorial, as a representation that 'wraps up' and 'packages' the painful, shameful truth of a historical reality. Thus memorialising versions of slavery seek to conceal the brutality of slavery beneath a veneer of benevolent white paternalism and the grateful submission of 'inferior' blacks. While forgiveness, although fraught, did not prove to be entirely impossible between Northern and Southern whites, the question of reconciliation between blacks and

¹⁰ As David Blight points out, a key feature of this representation was the use of black dialect by white authors. Citing the work of Thomas Nelson Page as exemplary of the genre, Blight describes how: 'Page's fiction, told invariably by a black voice, was one tale after another of sectional reunion, usually through love and marriage. To thousands of Northern readers of the 1880's and 1890's, their literary reunion was served up with the mesmerizing and reassuring music of black dialect.... What whites had torn asunder they might rediscover in the language of former slaves; they needed the freedmen, after all, to remind them of what *their* war had ruined. And the sensible freedmen made no demands of their own; they did not even have real lives of their own to be remembered.' See Blight, p.224.

whites was far more problematic. By the time Reconstruction had fallen apart in the late 1870's, Southern whites showed no signs of forgiving free blacks for being the 'cause' of the war. And the question of forgiveness on the part of blacks towards whites, for all that they had been made to suffer, simply seems never to have been raised in the nineteenth century - at least not by white people.

I want to suggest that Chestnut's comment offers some insight into the complex legacy of slavery that lay behind the myth of paternal benevolence, and the impossibility of forgiveness between free blacks and their former masters. The emphasis on love *lasting* – the persistence of an affective tie even in the absence of the object itself - is redolent of Freud's formulation of melancholia. As we saw in the Introduction, Freud characterises melancholia as a highly charged, ambivalent attachment that, after the loss of the object, takes up residence in the ego and proceeds to suck it dry. His version of melancholia is, to quote Alison Mark's lucid account of it, 'failed mourning [which] becomes a process of identification – [at] the heart of which is guilt and ambivalence about the object... [T]hough it protects the ego from a feared absolute destruction, [it] thenceforward shrinks the individual's life: failed grief becomes grievance, which impoverishes psychic life.'¹¹ This resonates with Chestnut's comment about love *lasting* interminably and resisting the notion of 'forgiveness'. When we consider the relationship between black servants and their white masters, this powerful ambivalent attachment – hate that is also love, love that is also hate - seems particularly relevant. I am not suggesting that slaves 'loved' their

¹¹ Alison Mark, 'Altered States/Identification Papers', review article in *Women: A Cultural Review* vol.10, no. 1 (1999), 97-105, (p.99).

masters in the way in which authors of plantation fiction would have us believe. As Caroline Gebhard has pointed out, all too often in white pro-slavery fiction, the subordination of blacks by whites is naturalised as blacks' desire to serve, thereby depicting a racial order in which, 'all blacks must "want" to cater to all whites'.¹² Nor am I attempting to ventriloquise the excluded voice of the black other. What I am concerned to show, however, is the way that Piatt's writing makes audible the processes by which this racial exclusion comes about.

Although Piatt's most significant poems about race were written and published in the early 1870's, over a decade before Southern plantation fiction had reached the height of its popularity, the plantation myth is discernable in her work. Yet it is repeatedly framed by Piatt's unease about categories of blackness and whiteness. Much as she struggles to keep these categories in their place, her writing also exposes their failure. In doing so, her poems bear witness to the complex legacy of love and hatred - and the impossibility of forgiveness - which lie behind the memorialisation of slavery.

¹² Caroline Gebhard, 'Reconstructing Southern Manhood' in *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*, eds. Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1997), pp 132-155, (p.143).

II

A Child's Party: Inheriting Mastery.

'A Child's Party' appeared in the children's magazine *Wideawake* in 1883, nearly a decade after most of Piatt's poems about slavery had appeared in print. I want to explore this poem before going on to look at those which were published in the 1870's because it allows us to trace the narrative of Piatt's relationship with her black nurse and the way in which, in adulthood, she remains in dialogue with this relationship and its troubling legacy.

At the beginning of the poem, the adult speaker recounts to her children an incident from her childhood on a Southern plantation, shortly after the death of her mother. The poem leads us straight *into* a dialogue between the speaker's child-self and her slave playmate:

Before my cheeks were fairly dry,
I heard my dusky playmate say:
"Well now your mother's in the sky,
And you can always have your way.

5 "Old Mistress has to stay you know,
And read the Bible in her room.
Let's have a party! Will you, though?"
Ah, well, the whole world was in bloom.

10 "A party would be fine, and yet-
There's no one here I can invite."
"Me and the children." "You forget-"
"Oh, please pretend that I am white."

I said, and think of it with shame,
 “Well, when its over, you’ll go back
 15 There to the cabin all the same,
 And just remember you are black.

 “I’ll be the lady, for, you see,
 I’m pretty,” I serenely said.
 “The black folk say that you would be
 20 If – if your hair just wasn’t red”

 “I’m pretty anyhow, you know.
 I saw this morning that I was.”
 “Old Mistress says its wicked, though,
 To keep on looking in the glass.” (Stanzas 1-6).

It is striking that in the speech of the black characters in the poem, dialect is minimal. Given that most nineteenth-century white authors, whether Northern or Southern,¹³ represented black speech solely in dialect, this is unusual.¹⁴ It is also noticeable that the white speaker’s black playmate is able to give as good as she gets when arguing with her and that the black girl is an acute observer of the ways of white adults. In fact, the slave child is able to move between the worlds of black and white people in a way that the white speaker cannot. At one point she counters her white companion’s arrogance with a comment on what the black people think of her (lines 19-20) and then answers her with the remark that, “Old Mistress says it’s wicked, though/ To keep on looking in the glass.” (lines 23-24). The black girl’s ability to mediate

¹³ Harriet Beecher Stowe and Mark Twain, for example, as well as much more crudely racist writers such as Thomas Nelson Page.

¹⁴ As Gavin Jones points out, several nineteenth-century commentators noted that there was often very little difference between the speech of blacks and whites in the South. Rather than being segregated, black and white forms of speech had become intermixed by the late nineteenth-century and this led to a sense of unease amongst whites about linguistic purity. As a result ‘...dialect literature was part of a much wider language politics. At its most extreme, this literature attempted to encode an essential blackness in the written representation of speech, making the lines of writing into color lines designed to segregate upon the printed page...’ For a detailed discussion of black dialect literature see, Gavin Jones, *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) p.107.

between these two separate worlds is again apparent in stanza twenty-four when she undermines the speaker's scornfulness towards Brother Blair, telling her. "He preaches now, you ought to know. / I tell you we are proud when he eats dinner at our cabin..." The adult speaker, looking back on her childhood, confesses that she thinks 'with shame' of the racist put-downs that she used against her black playmate. And the ironic reference to her 'Caucasian scorn' (stanza 23, line 90) suggests that, with hindsight, she is aware of her own racism as something which distorts her view of the world and which is so deeply rooted that it seems to be an inevitable attribute of white identity.

Through the black girl's comments about her family's relationship with Brother Blair, Piatt allows us a glimpse of the slave community that reveals it as a place with its own social hierarchy and sense of pride (significantly it is Brother Blair, the old man who has been 'set free', who occupies the most respected position in the black community). In the final stanzas, it is clear that the black adults in the poem wield considerable power within the plantation household. Their power stems in part from the fact that the speaker sees them from the perspective of a child; brother Blair, the cook 'priestess of the eternal flame' and the housemaid 'who swept the cobwebs from the earth' (stanza 28) are all adults and therefore powerful and imposing figures to her. Yet Piatt also makes clear that the slaves, far from being an undifferentiated group of childlike 'happy darkies' dependent on white benevolence, are authoritative adults governed by a complex set of relations both in terms of their own community and their relationship to the whites who enslave them. Thus in spite of her automatic

privilege of whiteness, the speaker is subordinated to the authority of the slaves who keep the household running smoothly and carry out the orders of 'Old Mistress', the speaker's Grandmother.¹⁵

Piatt's representation of the intricacies of plantation life contrasts with the heavy-handed, stereotypical depictions of blacks that were deployed by white writers, whether Southern or abolitionist. Harriet Beecher Stowe's representation of George Shelby's visit to Uncle Tom's cabin, for example, portrays Aunt Chloe and Uncle Tom as adoringly respectful of the young white master and never questioning their own subordinate status:

"How easy white folks al'us does things!" said Aunt Chloe, pausing while she was greasing a griddle with a scrap of bacon... and regarding young Master George with pride. "The way he can write now, now! And read too! And then to come out here evenings and read his lessons to us, - its mighty interestin'!"¹⁶

Even though George Shelby teaches Uncle Tom to read and write, literacy is for Stowe the natural province of whites, something that comes 'easy' to them, while Uncle Tom, in contrast struggles laboriously to learn to write. It is also noticeable that Tom's access to literacy is carefully mediated by 'Mas'r George'. His instruction in the art of reading and writing is dependent on his 'confiding and humble simplicity'.¹⁷ In contrast, while Brother Blair cannot actually write ('spell', line 88)), he is able to 'study' the New Testament and disseminate the gospel amongst the rest of the slave

¹⁵ See Paula Bernat Bennett's note on the plantation hierarchy as it is depicted in the poem. Bennett, *Palace-Burner*, p.175, n.86.

¹⁶ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Ed. Jean Fagin Yellin, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p.27.

¹⁷ Stowe, p.27.

community via his teaching, which gives him the authority of a spiritual leader. Again, this is in contrast to Stowe who does not represent blacks as being able to 'preach' their own interpretations of the Bible. Instead, she represents the young white master as a key figure at the slaves' prayer meeting in Tom's cabin, reading the Bible to them as they listen admiringly and remark that, ' "A minister couldn't lay it off better than he did;" that "'twas reely 'mazin'!" '18

Given that Piatt was herself a Southerner who had ample opportunity to observe plantation life, it is not surprising that the slaves in 'A Child's Party' are represented in a much more sophisticated way than those in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Yet even though Piatt manages to represent black characters with far more subtlety than most of her white contemporaries (including other Southerners), there are still moments when conventional stereotypes creep into the poem. In stanza twenty-six, Brother Blair refers to the slave girl as 'this black little imp' while describing the white girl's silk bonnet as 'like a rose'. This comment, which fulfils the white girl's notions of herself as 'pretty' in contrast to the slave girl's 'weird face/And rude round form' (lines 73-74), suggests either that Brother Blair is adept at saying what his white masters want to hear or, (more likely, given the way in which it echoes the speaker's own language which seems unable to conceive of blackness as anything other than 'weird' and 'elfish') reflects the distortion of black speech when it is mediated through white consciousness, albeit in a far less extreme way than in Stowe's writing.

¹⁸ Stowe, p.35.

There is also the question of the speaker's relationship to her nurse, who defends her against the outrage of the other slaves;

"Who blamed my child?" she said. "It makes
My heart ache when they trouble you.
Here's a whole basketful of cakes,
And I'll come to the party too." ...

125 Tears made of dew were in my eyes.
These after-tears are made of brine.
No sweeter soul is in the skies
Than hers, my mother's nurse and mine. (Stanzas 31-32)

Here the speaker's vulnerability and dependence on the nurse are clearly apparent, not just because she takes her part in the argument, but also because of the way in which she is at once a link with and a substitute for the speaker's dead mother ('my mother's nurse and mine.') It is at this moment that the force of slavery as a legacy handed on by the speaker's dead mother - a form of inherited dependency - and the impossibility of cutting emotional ties with it, is most in evidence.

I suggest that we read this poem as an attempt to come to terms with the way in which slavery is at once an inheritance of mastery and a form of mastery which 'masters' (in the sense of taking hold of from beyond the grave and possessing) those who inherit it. The speaker's relationship with her nurse figures the way in which the master/slave relationship passes from mother to daughter, both in a literal sense in that the nurse is a piece of property handed on by the speaker's mother and in the sense that slavery itself becomes a kind of constitutive inheritance in which the speaker is trapped ('I think of it with shame').

The speaker's retrospective 'unpacking' of this inheritance is apparent in the scene where she and her playmate are taking objects from inside the parlor and the 'secret closet' and setting them up in the 'outside air' (stanzas 8-13, lines 29-52)). The tone is one of gothic pastiche. While the children are awed by the grandeur of the parlour, Piatt makes clear that it is a decaying, 'antique' grandeur. The wall 'shudders' as they remove the mirror from it as though the whole gothic structure is so fragile that it could collapse at any moment. The situation is particularly ironic because the children are blithely unaware that while the china plates and 'solid silver' confirm the speaker's 'blue' blood, the black girl herself has a similar status as a piece of property belonging to her white playmate. So while the heirlooms in the closet represent the speaker's patrician status they also implicate her in slavery as a crime of her 'ancestors' (in true gothic fashion). Although the speaker claims the valuable objects as her birthright, they actually represent the way in which she is herself 'claimed' by her ancestors thus perpetuating their legacy of slave owning.

In the seventh stanza, however, there is a sense of promise and potentiality, '...at our feet/ A faint green blossoming carpet lay,/By some strange chance, divinely sweet,/Just shaken on that gracious day' (lines 25-28). The children, in dismantling the creaking, antiquated interior of the house, seem to have the agency to transform it into something different in the outside world:

We spread the carpet. By a great
Gray tree, we leant the mirror's glare,

55 And graven spoon and pictured plate
 Were wildly scattered here and there.

 And then our table: - Thereon gleamed,
 Adorned with many an apple-bud,
 Foam-frosted, dainty things that seemed

60 Made of the most delicious mud. (Stanzas 14-15).

In stanza fourteen the mirror, which stands in for the ‘glare’ of authority, is passively ‘leant’ against the tree, suggesting that the children are at least temporarily able to evade the gaze of adult surveillance. And the spoons and plates, engraved with the images of her ancestors and symbols of their authority, are ‘wildly scattered’, their symbolic authority disordered through the chaos of childish invention. The children’s party is an unintentional parody of an adult tea party, slightly absurd and comical, yet it also seems to have power to defamiliarise social ritual.

In spite of the transgressiveness of their tea-party and dressing-up, however, the speaker is ruthless in asserting the boundaries of racial difference:

 Next came our dressing. As to that,
 I had the fairest shoes! (on each
 Were four gold buttons) and a hat,
 And the plume the blushes of the peach.

65 But there was my dark, elfish guest
 Still standing shabby in her place.
 How could I use her to show best
 My own transcendent bloom and grace?

70 “You’ll be my grandmama,” I sighed
 After much thought, somewhat in fear.
 She, joyous to her sisters cried:
 “Call me old Mistress! Do you hear?”

75 About that little slave's weird face
 And rude, round form, I fastened all
 My grandmama's most awful lace
 And grandmama's most sacred shawl.

(Stanzas 16-19)

The speaker seems only able to conceive of blackness as something 'elfish', 'shabby', 'weird'. The speaker dresses her playmate as 'Old Mistress' but despite the black girl's 'joyousness' at being able to dress up as an authority figure, the costume is an asexual one, the better to provide a foil for the 'bloom and grace' of the white speaker. In the imaginative make-believe of their tea party the black girl remains 'in her place' – subjugated to her white playmate – just as much as in the 'real' world. (It is also worth noting that it is still the white girl who is giving the orders to her playmate, "Well – ask him!" line 97). So despite the way in which the speaker's game of make-believe with her black companion seems to destabilise her gothic inheritance – subjecting the interior of the old plantation mansion to scrutiny, dismantling it and carrying it outside into the light of day – the children end up blindly reinforcing the legacy of the speaker's 'ancestors'.

While the speaker's child self unwittingly enacts her white, patriarchal, slave-owning inheritance, does the adult speaker's needy relationship with her (now dead) nurse mean that she too is locked into this inheritance? Or, with the benefit of hindsight, is she able to avoid replicating it, in a way that her childhood self of the poem is not? The adult speaker's tone is ironic as she recounts the children's exploits. This irony, as well as her willingness to expose her own prejudice and blindness, suggest that she is engaged in a retrospective 'unpacking' of her own past which is

subtle and knowing, in contrast to the children's naivety. The speaker's comment to her child listener in stanza twelve ('Hush child, this splendid tale is true!)/Were one of these on earth to-day (sic), you'd know right well my blood was *blue*;/You'd own I was not common clay' is deliberately hyperbolic, ironising and displacing the moment of encounter between the white child and her ancestors. (Again, by referring to the ancestors 'in china' the speaker transforms the gothic moment into comedy). In this way, the adult speaker seems both to inhabit and to be outside of the legacy of her ancestors. It is also significant that the story of the tea party is being told to a child. Whether the child is the speaker's own or not is unclear, but the significance of this scene of story telling is that the speaker's retrospective narrative itself becomes a form of inheritance for the next generation. The speaker's story telling is a legacy in that it points to her own eventual absence and it is an attempt to 'work through' her own relationship to this scene from her past.

The psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche notes that Freud conceives of mourning as work and reworking but he criticises Freud's emphasis on the detachment of the subject from the lost object. In Freud's description of mourning, '[e]ach single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hyper-cathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it'.¹⁹ But Laplanche is critical of this notion that ties with the past can ultimately be severed:

¹⁹ Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p.245

Everything rests...on the notion of detachment (*Losung*) which Freud, in an entirely inadequate understanding, considers as the liberating severing of a bond with the object, and not as an *analysis*. Upon the fabric of my existence, woven with the web of the other (now lost), loss causes me to perform an unravelling, a painful meditation. But each thread, although I indeed separate it off from the whole... is not broken as Freud claimed. It is, on the contrary, over-invested, contemplated separately, reintegrated into its history... and beyond this history in common, of the couple for instance, reintegrated into a more inclusive and much longer history.

...the loss necessitates the work of a reordering of my existence, of a new vision which will take into account the absence of a loved one, but also will encompass his or her memory.²⁰

The speaker's retrospective unpacking of her Southern past represents the 'unravelling' and 'painful meditation' that Laplanche describes. It is through this unravelling of that gothic moment of encounter with her ancestors and their legacy that the speaker is able to interrogate it (rather than simply attempting to cut her ties with it). Her narration articulates the double bind of her position – she is at once trapped within the legacy of her slave-owning ancestors and is also aware of her own repetition of it. It is this awareness of her own predicament that she is able to pass on – as her legacy - to the child listening to her tale, ensuring that the child will have a different relationship to the scene (a relationship mediated by her story telling) and will therefore be in a position to avoid another blind repetition of the past.

²⁰ Jean Laplanche, 'Psychoanalysis, Time and Translation' in *Jean Laplanche: Seduction, Translation and the Drives: A Dossier*. ed. by John Fletcher and Martin Stanton, (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts 1992), pp.161-177, (pp.172-173).

III

‘The slave of Slavery’: The Black Princess

In ‘A Child’s Party’, the speaker is able to interrogate her Southern past and (at least to some extent) her own racism. Piatt’s poem ‘The Black Princess’ (published eleven years earlier) is, however, far more troubling. Subtitled ‘A True Fable of My Old Kentucky Nurse’, the poem is part fable, part elegy for the black nurse who appears in several other poems, including ‘A Child’s Party’ and ‘Over in Kentucky’. While ‘A Child’s Party’ presents us with a vividly-remembered scene from the speaker’s childhood and with a number of different voices from the past (the speaker’s own and that of her playmate, as well as the voices of Brother Blair and the nurse herself) ‘The Black Princess’ is the white speaker’s re-telling of the story of ‘my old Kentucky nurse’, in which the voice of the black woman is conspicuously absent.²¹

It is noticeable that in telling the story of the black ‘princess’ the speaker is ambivalent about the status of the poem as ‘fable’ or ‘fairy tale’ despite the fact that it seems to lead to the inevitable ‘happy’ ending. In the first five stanzas, she tells us,

I knew a Princess: she was old,
Crisp-haired, flat-featured, with a look
Such as no dainty pen of gold
Would write of in a fairy book

²¹ The poem’s subtitle bears an uncanny similarity to the title of Stephen Foster’s 1853 poem, ‘My Old Kentucky Home, Good-Night’. Eric Lott points out that Foster’s poem, ‘unquestionably evoked sympathy for separated slave families and generally implied the feeling humanity of slaves, though in doing so it relied on old racial stereotypes.’ Piatt’s poem is similarly ambivalent, both praising the black woman and at the same time relying heavily on orientalist stereotypes of black otherness. See Eric Lott, ‘Twain, Race, and Blackface’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Mark Twain*, ed. by Forrest G. Robinson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp.129-152, (p.131).

- 5 So bent she almost crouched, her face
 Was like the Sphinx's face, to me,
 Touched with vast patience, desert grace,
 And lonesome, brooding mystery.
- What wonder that a faith so strong
 10 As hers, so sorrowful, so still,
 Should watch in bitter sands so long,
 Obedient to a burdening will!
- This Princess was a slave – like one
 I read of in a painted tale;
 15 Yet free enough to see the sun,
 And all the flowers without a veil.
- Not of the lamp, not of the ring,
 The helpless, powerful slave was she;
 But of a subtler, fiercer thing –
 20 She was the slave of Slavery. (Stanzas 1-5)

In the first stanza the speaker distances her tale from the artifice of the 'dainty pen of gold' and the 'fairy book'. Instead she emphasises the woman's African features, ('crisp-haired', 'flat-featured') which seem to disqualify her from the role of story book 'princess'. Similarly in the fifth stanza the speaker seems to be suggesting that the subtle, 'fierce' reality of 'Slavery' exceeds the descriptions of it in the 'painted tale,' but the speaker seems unable to leave this language behind. In fact its very 'painted' quality – its fanciful ornateness - is what fascinates her. It is through this imagery of grandeur and artifice – the exotic luxuriance suggested by the pen of gold writing in the fairy book – that the poem takes up the semiotics of orientalism.

In the second stanza, for example, the speaker refers to the black woman's face as like that of the Sphinx. This suggests that the woman has a mysterious secretiveness about her - an enigmatic profundity – yet the poem delimits this profundity by slotting

it into the discourse of orientalism. As Edward Said has pointed out, it is by overcoming this enigmatic ‘otherness’ of the Orient that white Western reason affirms itself. He argues that within the terms of Orientalist discourse the Oriental is represented as

...irrational, depraved, (fallen), childlike, “different”: thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, “normal.” ... Knowledge of the Orient...in a sense creates the Orient, the Oriental and his world... the Oriental is depicted as something one judges (as in a court of law), something one studies and depicts (as in a curriculum), something one disciplines (as in a school or prison), something one illustrates as in a zoological manual). The point is that in each of these cases the Oriental is *contained* and *represented* by dominating frameworks.²²

Even as she praises the woman, the poem’s white speaker imposes on her an essentialist, racialised framework. It is worth noting at this point that Mary Chestnut also referred to her slaves as ‘sphinx-like’, in the same breath describing them as, ‘...placid, docile, kind and obedient. Also as lazy and dirty as ever’.²³ thus evoking the image of the happy irresponsible darkie so beloved of plantation fiction. At another point in her diary Chestnut again refers to slaves as ‘sphinxes...certain in their action and as noiseless as a law of nature...’²⁴. Although this description of her slaves might seem to contradict the happy darkie image, she is still aligning blacks with nature, implying that they are amoral and lacking in reason (‘irrational, depraved’ as opposed to ‘rational, virtuous’ whites). Similarly, although the speaker in Piatt’s poem is praising the black woman, the terms of her praise unwittingly echo Chestnut’s racist vocabulary. In stanza two, the woman’s ‘vast patience’, ‘desert grace’ and ‘lonesome.

²² Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Penguin Books, 1977) p.40

²³ Chestnut, p.233.

²⁴ Chestnut, p.641.

brooding mystery', suggest a timeless endurance that links her to nature rather than reason and makes her appear tantalisingly exotic as well as enigmatic. Thus in romanticising her (and her suffering), the poem aligns the black woman with the oriental 'Other'.

In her discussion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Diane Roberts remarks that,

The slave south is America's domestic Orient, its secret self, its Other, as the African and the female – so involved in representations of the South – are Other. The feminized, receptive, seductive metaphorical landscape of the South owes much to the seductive, secretive metaphorical landscape of the Orient. The geography of the Other is a cultural production: the west makes the east in the image of its "dark" self as the American North constructs the slave South as its "dark" self.²⁵

Stowe does frequently makes use of oriental imagery, for example when she describes the Shelby plantation in Louisiana;

It was built in the Moorish fashion...The court, in the inside had evidently been arranged to gratify a picturesque and voluptuous ideality. Wide galleries ran all around the four sides, whose Moorish arches, slender pillars and arabesque ornaments, carried the mind back, as in a dream, to the reign of oriental romance in Spain. In the middle of the court, a fountain threw high its silvery water, falling in a never-ceasing spray into a marble basin, fringed with a deep border of fragrant violets. The water in the fountain, pellucid as crystal, was alive with myriads of gold and silver fishes, twinkling and darting through it like so many living jewels.²⁶

²⁵ Diane Roberts, *The Myth of Aunt Jemima: Representations of Race and Region*, (London: Routledge, 1994) p.29.

²⁶ Stowe, pp.168-169.

As Roberts points out, the 'Oriental tale' was extremely popular in both Britain and America in the nineteenth century.²⁷ In 'The Black Princess', Piatt, like Stowe and so many other white writers, connects slaves and the South with the exotic, mysterious landscape of the Orient.²⁸

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the oriental South represents paganism and sensuality. Morally corrupted by slavery, the decadence of the South has to be purged from the American body politic by the restraining, purifying influence of the virtuous North. And the key to the removal of slavery - the salvation for both blacks and whites, according to Stowe - is redemption through Christian faith. 'The Black Princess' is also an anti-slavery text in the sense that slavery is presented as cruelly 'subtle' and 'fierce' (stanza 5), but the poem lacks Stowe's moral certainty. The speaker describes with admiration how the black woman is sustained through her suffering by her 'strong', 'sorrowful' faith (stanza 3),²⁹ yet the poem's ending, which sees the black woman safe in her 'Father's house' at last (the capitalised 'Father' has the symbolic force of God the Father) provides an incomplete resolution at best:

²⁷ Piatt's reference to the princess in the painted tale who has to wear a 'vail', and the references to the slave of the lamp and slave of the ring are taken from the tale of Aladdin. Roberts notes that *The Arabian Nights*, which first appeared in English in 1705, was very popular in the United States as well as Europe in the nineteenth century (see Roberts, p.200, n.9). Another reference to the 'slave of the ring' appears in Piatt's Civil War poem, 'Giving Back the Flower' and, in the context of this earlier poem, refers to a married woman. In 'The Black Princess' Piatt seems to be wryly playing on this double meaning, implying that both black and white women are objects of exchange between men.

²⁸ Emma Lazarus's poem, 'The South', published in *Lippincott's Magazine* in 1878 is another example of the way in which the South was coded as Oriental. Lazarus characterises the 'Spirit of the musky South' as 'A creole with still-burning, languid eyes' who lies indolently in the midst of a lush, decadently sensual landscape, 'like some half-savage, dusky Indian queen'. While fascinated by the fecundity and lushness of the South, the poem's tone is also censorious. For instance the description of 'the Soldier's wooden cross, / O'ergrown by creeping tendrils and rank moss', in the sixth stanza, implies both physical decay and moral corruption. See Paula Bernat Bennett's anthology, *Nineteenth-Century American Poets*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp 284-285.

²⁹ As Bennett notes, the description of the river in stanza ten echoes the spiritual, "Michael, Row the Boat Ashore". See Bennett, *Palace-Burner*, p.167, n.27.

And in her Father's house beyond,
 They gave her beauty, robe, and crown:
 On me, I think, far, faint, and fond,
 44 Her eyes today look, yearning down. (Stanza 11)

Even though she has been released from her suffering by death (the Knight of the Pale Horse) the black woman does not find heaven to be a state of blissful contentment; instead she looks with 'yearning' down on the living.

In spite of her critical stance towards slavery, then, Piatt is not deploying orientalism in order to contrast the slave-holding South with the North as Stowe does. Nor does the moral of her 'fable' seem to be that blacks' suffering under slavery is rewarded by a Christian heaven. Rather, while Northern abolitionist discourse codes the South as oriental and exotic in order to censure it, Piatt draws on this same orientalist imagery because it seems to have been one of the few discourses available to her, as a Southerner, for conceptualising blackness. Certainly, throughout the poem, blackness is characterised as the fallen 'Other' of whiteness, and this is in spite of the fact that the speaker strives to praise the black woman's 'helpless, powerful' heroism:

Court lace nor jewels had she seen:
 She wore a precious smile, so rare
 That at her side the whitest queen
 Were dark – her darkness was so fair.
 25 Nothing of loveliest loveliness
 This strange sad Princess seemed to lack:
 Majestic with her calm distress
 She was, and beautiful, though black. (Stanzas 6-7)

In stanza seven, the speaker presents us with the curiously redundant image of 'loveliest loveliness'. The tautology of this description threatens to topple into meaninglessness, and is rendered even more precarious because it is enclosed by 'Nothing' and 'seemed to lack' which negate rather than emphasise her 'loveliness'. In addition, the rhyme of 'lack' and 'black' brings the stanza to an abrupt end, finally collapsing the speaker's hyperbolic praise of the woman. Her blackness defines her beauty as strange, oriental, other, yet if she is beautiful *though* black then her beauty must be determined by something other than her blackness – something which, in effect, transcends it.

Ostensibly it is the nurse's faith and her inner virtues of strength, endurance, and patient (passive) suffering that comprise her beauty. (And at this point the poem does seem to skirt close to Stowe's message that blacks' suffering can be transcended through their innate, childlike simplicity which allows them to put their faith in Christianity). The outward sign of these inner qualities is her 'precious smile' and, as the speaker tells us, it is this that would make 'the whitest queen' look, 'dark – her darkness was so fair' (lines 23-24). Here, whiteness is set up not just in opposition to blackness, it becomes the term that will supposedly transcend it. Thus, lacking an alternative discourse in which to praise the black woman – one that would account for her virtues *and* her blackness - the highest praise that the speaker can give her is to say that she is white.

Certainly Piatt is not alone in making this move. Virginia French's poem, 'Mammy' is another example of the way in which writers resorted to the trope of inner 'whiteness' in order to praise black characters;

On the quaint, old oaken settle, standing in the pleasant shade:
Sits good "Mammy" with "the child'un" while the summer afternoon
Wears the dewy veil of April, o'er the brilliancy of June.
Smooth and snowy is the 'kerchief, lying folded with an air
Of matron dignity above her silver-sprinkled hair:
Blue and white the beaded necklace used "of Sundays" to bedeck
(A dearly cherished amulet,) her plump and dusky neck;
Dark her neatly ironed apron, of a broad and ample size.
Spreading o'er the dress of "homespun" with its many coloured dyes.
True, her lips are all untutored, yet how genially they smile.
And how eloquent their fervor, praying, "Jesus bless de chile!"
True, her voice is hoarse and broken, but how tender its replies;
True, her hands are brown and withered, yet how loving are her eyes:
She has thoughts both high and holy tho' her brow is dark and low;
And her face is dusk and wrinkled but her soul is white as snow!³⁰
(Lines 4-18)

French's poem was published in the Southern magazine *The Land We Love*, in 1869 and typifies the idealised version of slavery and the old South presented by Southern apologists. The black servant is depicted as childlike and contented under slavery: her 'white' soul testifies to the fact that she fulfils her duty – the care of white children – unquestioningly, and implies that her loyalty will be rewarded in heaven.³¹

³⁰Bennett, *Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets: An Anthology*, pp.445-447.

³¹ It is ironic, given that they were writing at opposite ends of the political spectrum, that Stowe relies on the same racist stereotypes in her depiction of black characters as those used by pro-Southern writers like French. The character of Aunt Chloe, for example, is strikingly similar to 'Mammy'. In contrast, Piatt tends to avoid resorting to these stereotypes, never actually referring to the black women in her poems as Mammy, just as she makes only a very slight use of dialect

Twain, like Piatt, has a much more complex attitude towards race than French. Nonetheless, a similarly racist logic is evident in that moment towards the end of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, when Jim, having escaped at last from the cabin where he has been hiding, to the relative safety of the raft, places his own freedom in jeopardy by insisting that they go for a doctor for Tom Sawyer, who has been shot in the escape. Huck tells us

...me and Jim was consulting - and thinking. And after we'd thought a minute I says:

'Say it, Jim.'

So he says:

"Well, den, dis de way it look to me, Huck. Ef it wuz him dat' uz bein set free, en one er de boys wuz to git shot, would he say, "Go on en save me, nemmine 'bout a doctor f'r to save dis one"? Is dat like Mars Tom Sawyer? Would he say dat? You *bet* he wouldn't! *Well*, den, is *Jim* gwyne to say it? No, sah - I doan' budge a step out'n dis place, 'dout a *doctor*; not if its forty year!"

I knowed he was white inside, and I reckoned he'd say what he did say - so it was all right, now...³²

Jim's assertion that Tom would do the same for him rings hollow, given that it was Tom's romantic codes of adventure - his insistence on treating Jim's precarious situation as a game - which landed them in this predicament. It is Jim's self-sacrifice (on behalf of a *white* character) that confirms his worth in Huck's eyes, proving that he is 'white inside'. While, admittedly, it is Twain's speaker, Huck, who triumphantly makes this remark rather than Twain himself, it seems unthinkable that Jim would not cooperate at this point. His insistence that they get a doctor makes things, 'all right, now' and obligingly reinforces the racial hierarchy. As Eric Lott argues in his discussion of Twain's ambivalent attitude towards race:

³² Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, (Penguin Popular Classics, 1994), pp.264-5.

[c]onvinced of the humanity and identity of American blacks, Twain seems nevertheless to be haunted by their difference. Hence he returned over and over to the actual practice and literary trope of blackface, which hedges by imagining the Other as black only in exterior, still white inside. To think of blacks as altogether the same – as all white – threatens white supremacist identity; to think of them as altogether different – as all black – raises the specter of white annihilation and superfluity. As in many societies with subject populations at home or abroad, the Other must be rendered not quite black and yet not white. “They” must be versions of “us”, caught in a cycle of mimicry... and yet perennially unable to make the grade. Racist ideologies, even the relatively gentle ones Twain deploys, insert the boundaries that ever threaten to evaporate between the kinds of human beings stuck in such a hierarchical relationship...³³

Piatt, like Twain, seems to be convinced of blacks’ humanity, yet ‘haunted’ by their difference. The speaker’s praise of the nurse, like Huck’s of Jim, remains locked in a binary of blackness and whiteness which only serves to reassert the racial status quo. In the final four stanzas of the poem, the woman’s blackness – her difference – is figured as a fairy tale enchantment, which the poem attempts to erase in order to reveal the woman’s hidden, (presumably white) self:

Black, but enchanted black, and shut
 30 In some vague giant’s tower of air,
 Built higher than her hope was. But
 The true knight came and found her there.

The Knight of the Pale Horse, he laid
 His shadowy lance against the spell
 35 That hid her self: as if afraid,
 The cruel blackness shrank and fell.

Then, lifting slow her pleasant sleep,
 He took her with him through the night,
 And swam a river cold and deep,
 40 And vanished up an awful hight.

³³ Lott, pp.140-141.

And in her Father's house beyond,
 They gave her beauty, robe, and crown:
 On me, I think, far faint and fond,
 Her eyes to-day look, yearning, down. (Stanzas 8-11)

Blake's poem, 'The Little Black Boy' provides an interesting counterpoint to these stanzas.³⁴ For the black boy (and his mother) heaven is a realm of freedom, yet it proves to be a poisoned form of consolation. As Nicholas Williams points out,

... the mother's education, with its submission to "bearing" and its providential history... seems to be the product of Christian schools. Thus while making the primary claim of being born of his mother, a claim which then justifies him in figuratively "bearing" the little English boy in the final transfer of the poem, the little black boy's initial statement already bears the marks of colonial education. Although professing to teach the little English boy, the little black boy is already "taught" by Englishness before the poem begins.³⁵

The black child desires another world, one that transcends the hierarchy of blackness and whiteness, but his imagination is already shaped by colonialist ideology and therefore locked into this binary. His imaginative vision of heaven thus feeds back into the colonial system that exploits him. While he envisions a heaven where both black and white children are freed from the 'cloud' of colour, he sheds his blackness only to become white so that the white child with the 'silver hair' will love him. Yet he still remains in a position of servitude, 'shading' the white boy protectively and stroking his hair enviously, suggesting that the whiteness he desires so much remains elusive and that, unsurprisingly, he feels out of place in this white heaven. In 'The Black Princess' the nurse also has to shed her blackness in order to gain access to heaven. As

³⁴ William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

³⁵ Nicholas M. Williams, *Ideology and Utopia in the Poetry of William Blake*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.67.

we noted earlier, the poem's resolution is unsatisfactory. Although the black woman is apparently released from her suffering through death, 'her Father's house' (line 41) is only another form of imprisonment from which she looks down with 'yearning' (line 44). As with the little black boy's heaven, the heaven in this poem turns out to be a form of false consolation, one that reproduces her earthly state.

In 'The Little Black Boy' and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* we are being given an account of race from the perspective of a child. Blake and Twain's texts invite us to look beyond the simulated naivety of the child speaker, so that we glimpse the ideology that underlies what they say. As we saw in 'A Child's Party', (and in numerous other poems) Piatt herself is skilled at using the naive speech of children to expose the hypocrisies of adults. In 'The Black Princess', however, the speaker lacks the crucial, reflective distance from her racist statements that we find in 'A Child's Party'. When the speaker says the woman is 'beautiful, though black' for instance, the poem makes no move to interrogate the racism of this statement. Instead the speaker goes on to say 'black – but enchanted black' in an attempt to mitigate the woman's blackness (as something bad/ugly which has to be explained away).

The poem cannot, however, simply be read as a reaffirmation of racism, not least because of the way in which it lays bare the neediness of the white speaker in relation to her nurse. The speaker says in the third stanza that the black woman as a slave is, 'obedient to a burdening will' and it is ironic that if the nurse belongs to her, then the speaker's own will must account for the black woman's 'burden'. In the final

stanza, the woman still looks with yearning at her mistress, as though she longs to carry on serving her, just like the faithful mammy of plantation fiction. But it is the white speaker who is making the claim that she will transcend her blackness and go to heaven. In the final stanza the speaker attributes the ‘yearning’ gaze to the nurse, but who exactly is ‘far, faint and fond’ (line 43)? These adjectives could be taken to apply only to the nurse, but equally, we can read them as applying to the speaker herself. The speaker does go so far as to admit, ‘On me, *I think*’ [my italics] which is at least a partial (apparently unintended) admission that it is her own fond imagining which situates her as the focus of the black woman’s desire.

The reference to the black woman as ‘the slave of Slavery’ (line 20) further complicates the racist dynamics of the poem. Ostensibly, the speaker is casting her as the victim of slavery and, more problematically, as the victim of her own blackness. The capitalisation of Slavery creates a division between the slave and the system that victimises her and one effect of this is to emphasise her powerlessness. In addition to this, however, ‘Slavery’ itself becomes a transcendent term – something that exceeds the control of individuals – and thus the white speaker herself also seems to be a slave of Slavery. Certainly her neediness towards the nurse makes her a victim of the slave-owning system. But in a less literal way, the white speaker is enslaved to the *ideology* of Slavery and trapped in the binary that upholds whiteness and denigrates blackness.

While the poem is an elegy for the black woman – the final, consolatory move is to place her in heaven, apparently mourning for the speaker, just as the speaker

mourns for her – it seems to be as much about the loss of what she represents as it is about the nurse herself. (In the second stanza, the speaker compares her to the Sphinx, which bestows on her an abstract, representative status). The black woman is herself, but she is also more than herself. Ultimately, her death represents the passing of the ideology of the Old South (and the relationship between slave and mistress) in which the speaker - lacking an alternative, non-racist language - represents her. The speaker is not able to step outside of this racist ideology and interrogate it as she does in ‘A Child’s Party’, but she is at least partially able to articulate her own racism. This poem, written in the early 1870’s, has moved beyond Stowe’s much more circumscribed vision of black people and is on the cusp of the more complex, self-aware attitude towards race and racism that we encounter in Blake and Twain’s texts, as well as in Piatt’s own later writing.

IV

Over in Kentucky: Iron Chains and Glad Songs.

Both ‘The Black Princess’ and ‘Over in Kentucky’ appeared in *The Independent* in 1872. ‘Over in Kentucky’ is part critique of, part elegy for the Old South as well as being (like ‘The Black Princess’) a dramatisation of the way in which nostalgia for the Old South is inextricably bound up with the issue of race. The poem is set in Cincinnati, Ohio, which is divided from Kentucky by the Ohio River. In the 1870’s Cincinnati was thriving, but this also made it a place of industrialised pollution.

choked with smoke from coal dust and factories, as is pointed out in the first stanza of the poem;

“This is the smokiest city in the world,”
 A slight voice, wise and weary, said, “I know.
 My sash is tied, and if my hair was curled,
 I’d like to have my prettiest hat and go
 5 There where some violets had to stay, you said,
 Before your torn-up butterflies were dead –
 Over in Kentucky.”

In the first line, the adult speaker remarks that ‘this is the smokiest city in the world’ and her young daughter responds with a wish to return to Kentucky. The ‘you said’ and ‘your torn-up butterflies’ (lines 5 and 6) suggest that the child has heard stories of Kentucky from her mother and imagines it as a rural idyll of violets and butterflies. Yet the butterflies are ‘torn-up’ and ‘dead’ which implies that this is a pre-war landscape that has now been destroyed, although it seems to be this very lack of attainability – its past-ness – that makes it so attractive to the child speaker. Throughout the poem we can see this tension between the present and an elusive, fairy tale past. The black nurse echoes the child’s wish for the past in the second stanza, ‘yet though it may be better to be free,/ I’d rather have things as they used to be/Over in Kentucky’ (lines 13-14), and in the final stanza the speaker herself seems to wish for the return of the, ‘beauty that has vanished from the ground/Over in Kentucky’ (lines 42-43).

The poem may seem to be merely an exercise in nostalgia for the lost, prewar South, but when we read it more closely it becomes much more complex than this. In

the sixth stanza, the speaker describes the past and present as two worlds, divided by the river;

For yonder river, wider than the sea,
 Seems sometimes in the dusk a visible moan
 Between two worlds – one fair, one dear to me.
 The fair has forms of ever-glimmering stone,
 Weird-whispering ruin, graves where legends hide,
 And lies in mist upon the charmed side,
 35 Over in Kentucky.

The river is a physical gulf, separating the speaker from Kentucky, and it is also a gulf in the temporal sense, in that it separates her from the past. This river is, presumably, flowing onwards, like the forward march of time, but it is also 'wider than the sea' as though its proportions are incalculable, exceeding the individual's horizon. It is also 'a visible moan' which seems to encompass both the speaker's own pain at the separation of the two worlds ('– one fair, one dear to me') and a collective pain on a grand scale. The synesthesia of the 'visible moan' is disorientating: here is something that exceeds and disturbs the senses, and as well as this, figures the contradictory nature of the speaker's own position – the way she inhabits a space between these two divided worlds. Part of the speaker's difficulty, in fact, is that while the river divides the two worlds (fair and dear, past and present, South and North) from each other, it also connects them. The past continues to inhabit the present and vice versa, and the speaker remains caught between the two. (Significantly it is at dusk, the liminal time between night and day that the river takes on this strange form, which again emphasises that position of being suspended *between* different elements).

It is at this point that the speaker begins to examine explicitly the relationship between the two worlds. The past, she tells us, ‘lies in mist upon the charmed side/Over in Kentucky’ (lines 34-35) and the word ‘charmed’ is telling. The far side of the river (through its very inaccessibility) is under some kind of spell that protects it from the usual misfortunes of life, and it also exerts a ‘charm’ of its own which gives it the power to allure and fascinate. This power is due to its insubstantiality: semi-obscured by mist, the indistinct forms of ‘ever-glimmering stone’ and ‘weird-whispering ruin’ (lines 32-33) are intriguing and bewitching because they lack the solidity of the mundane present. But equally, if ‘glimmering’ implies a lack of solidity, the fact that they are ‘ever-glimmering’ means they have the quality of permanence – or, more accurately, changelessness. In other words, this idyllic, prewar Kentucky may lack material substance but certainly exerts a tenacious hold over the psyches of the dispossessed Southerners who mourn for it. While she too is mourning, the speaker is also sceptical about this ‘fair’ world, and the language in which she describes it is ambiguous. The fair world, ‘... lies in mist upon the charmed side/Over in Kentucky’ (lines 34-35), in other words, the past reposes, shrouded in mist, on the far side of the river. But at the same time, just as the graves ‘hide’ their legends, so Kentucky seems to ‘lie’ in the sense of having something to hide. The fairy tale past, that is, does not tell the truth about itself, instead it is concealed in the mists of nostalgia. ‘Lie’ seems here to be polysemic, denoting the way in which Piatt’s speaker inhabits a position of both/and – simultaneously mourning the loss of a ‘better’ past and criticising the nostalgia that harks back to an elusive golden age.

In the final stanza the speaker explicitly compares the past with the present;

The dear has restless, dimpled, pretty hands,
 Yearning toward unshaped steel, unfancied wars,
 Unbuilt cities, and unbroken lands,
 With something sweeter than the faded stars
 40 And dim, dead dewes of my lost romance, found
 In beauty that has vanished from the ground,
 Over in Kentucky. (Stanza 6)

Her tone in the last two lines is one of mingled nostalgia and disillusionment. The 'fair' world of the past seems, after all, to have been an illusion. In line forty the speaker's 'lost romance' evokes the graves, ruins and legends of the previous stanza, which belong to Kentucky's remote, 'romantic' past (as opposed to its actual history). We thus get the sense that the speaker is referring to her romance with Kentucky itself, (or rather a particular, mythical version of Kentucky), as well as to her own romantic – and romanticised – personal history. Given that it is in the nature of romance to be illusory and unreal, it begins to look at this point as if 'romance' is being used to signal Piatt's scepticism about the idealised past (her awareness of the way in which this version of the past gives lie to itself). Before we explicate the full implications of this, though, we need to explore the relationship between nostalgia and idealisation in the poem.

The 'dear' world of the present, represented by her children, promises a bright future of new cities and new lands – a future of modernity and progress – which seems to be far more substantial than the past. The speaker appears to be saying, in effect, that the 'dim, dead' past has to be left behind in order to make way for the conquests

of the future. Yet the poem does not simply transmute nostalgia into idealism. While the next generation yearns for new wars, new cities and new lands, the speaker is far more dubious about the future – a future in which both industrialisation and progress emerge as forms of violence. The link between the ‘unshaped steel’ and the ‘unfancied wars’ (line 37) is, after all, the urban factories that will transform the steel into weapons (warfare as industry). Similarly, the demand for these new urban centres entails the violent appropriation and destruction – breaking – of ‘unbroken lands’ (line 38). Significantly, it is the ugliness and dirtiness of the city that makes the child and the nurse, as well as the speaker herself, long for the idealised rural past of Kentucky. Thus the speaker is not merely contrasting the past with the present, she is also suggesting that it is precisely the industrialised modernity which they are all inhabiting which calls up a mythic past. Similarly, if nostalgia is a form of blindness – willfully refusing to see the past as anything other than Edenic – then idealism works in the same way in relation to the future. The conquering and appropriation of new lands (not to mention the waging of war) is justified through an idealism that locates the promise of a better world in the future. To speak of the next generation ‘yearning’ towards the future suggests a persistent, wistful longing for something that is unattainable because it is an ideal. Idealism and nostalgia, then, are both intrinsic to modernity; both are ways of defending against the uncertainty and dislocation of the present.

If the poem deliberately sets out to criticise this relentless transformation of both past and future into a golden age, it also appears to make the same predictable

moves in relation to race as some of the worst of Southern apologist writing: the reference in stanza three to the slave songs as 'glad' for instance. As Frederick Douglass pointed out, it was a common misconception amongst whites that slaves sang because they were contented and happy (we will return to the question of how whites perceived slave songs in the next section).³⁶ There is also the comment made by the black woman in stanza two, "What is gone is gone. /Yet, though it may be better to be free,/ I'd rather have things as they used to be/ Over in Kentucky' (lines 11-14). Given the extent of blacks' suffering after the war, it is plausible that the black woman might say such a thing, particularly if she had been a domestic slave, and therefore better off than the slaves who worked in the fields. Nevertheless, the ex-slave who claims to have been happier under slavery is a favourite trope of Southern writing. The most famous example of this is in Thomas Nelson Page's story, 'Marse Chan: A Tale of Old Virginia' (first published in *Century* magazine, 1887), where Sam reminisces loyally about how he was much better off as a slave;

Dem was good ole times, marster – de bes' Sam ever see! ... Niggers didn' hed nothin' 't all to do – jes hed to ten to de feedin' an cleanin' de hosses, an doin what de marster tell 'em to do...³⁷

Does the black woman's comment that she would rather have things as they used to be, align the poem with the racist, pro-slavery discourse of Page's plantation fiction? Certainly the white speaker's response to the nurse's comment suggests that (like the

³⁶ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, ed. by Houston A. Baker, Jr, (New York: Penguin Classics, 1986) p.58.

³⁷ Thomas Nelson Page, 'Marse Chan: A Tale of Old Virginia', in *In Ole Virginia: the Novels, Stories, Sketches and Poems of Thomas Nelson Page*, Volume One, (New York: Scribners, 1906), pp.3-46. (p.13).

white speaker in ‘The Black Princess’) she does not think slavery was a good thing for blacks:

Perhaps I thought how fierce the master’s hold,
 Spite of all armies, kept the slave within;
 How iron chains, when broken, turned to gold,
 In empty cabins, where glad songs had been,
 Before the Southern sword knew blood and rust,
 20 Before wild cavalry sprang from the dust,
 Over in Kentucky.

As in ‘The Black Princess’, slavery is described as ‘fierce’. Clearly the speaker views it as destructive, and the fact that the master’s hold remains over those who used to be slaves, even after the war has freed them, suggests that the speaker is aware of the subtle, psychological force of the slave system. Slavery, as a state of mind, brings us back to that moment in ‘The Black Princess’ when it becomes a transcendent term, becomes ideology – a mindset that imposes itself on both blacks and whites. Certainly the ideological pull of the Old South seems to be equally strong for both the black and white speakers in ‘Over in Kentucky’, and so it begins to look as if whites, as much as blacks, are still enslaved by ‘Slavery’.

We saw earlier how the speaker’s reference to her ‘lost romance’ in the final stanza raises the question of whether the past is lost not only because it has now passed away, but also because, as a ‘romance’, it never really existed in the first place. This question remains undecidable precisely because of the ideological pull of the Old South. The poem is caught between nostalgia and a far more radical perception of the past, and the tension between these is played out in a very similar way to the conclusion of ‘The Black Princess’; just as the speaker in that poem inhabits a position

that is both inside and outside of racist ideology, so too does the speaker in 'Over in Kentucky'.

Stanza three is striking for the way in which the politically radical third line is placed in direct contradiction with the banal racist sentiment of line four: '...iron chains, when broken, turned to gold, / In empty cabins, where glad songs had been' (lines 17-18). To say that iron chains, once they are broken, turn to gold is to admit that the fairy tale past was never really there; that transformation of iron into gold epitomises the working of nostalgia. Yet in the next line, the speaker refers to the singing in the slave cabins as 'glad songs', apparently unaware that she has just exposed this version of the past and slavery as false. The 'iron chains' and 'glad songs' are a direct contradiction of each other; either the slaves were singing glad songs in their iron chains (which is highly unlikely despite what the black woman has said in the previous stanza), or the songs which they sang while in chains were not 'glad', but something else entirely.

Although the iron chains and glad songs – two entirely different versions of the past – simply don't add up, the contradiction is never resolved. Instead, the speaker deliberately leaves this complexity behind. The third stanza opens with 'perhaps' and the repetition of this word at the start of the fourth stanza signals an end to this train of thought. The child whose eyes are, 'half-full of tears, / half-full of sleep' (lines 22-23) wants to be comforted by a fairy tale version of the past, and so the speaker has to put aside the question of slavery that has been preoccupying her. As we saw when we

looked at the final stanza, the speaker's children with their 'restless, dimpled, pretty hands' (line 36) represent the future, and it is significant that it is one of her children who brings the speaker up short and makes her change mental gear, as it were, forcing her to abandon her musings about slavery in order to create 'fairy pictures' of the past (line 24). If the children and their needs represent the future, then it is this move into the future that demands that the contradictions and complexity of the past are concealed. So the past remains obscured by nostalgia and the true meaning of it is unexplored because its complexity is unassimilable – works counter to – the optimistic, idealistic, forward movement of progress.

At this point, 'Over in Kentucky' does seem to contradict 'A Child's Party'. As we saw, the speaker in the latter poem is able to interrogate her Southern heritage and pass on to her child a different relationship with the past. Her storytelling enables the child to avoid repeating it, but 'Over in Kentucky', (the earlier poem), is less optimistic. The speaker's bedtime stories of an antebellum Eden merely fuel the next generation's desire to recreate that ideal in the future, implying that they will blindly repeat the mistakes of the past – particularly its racism – further down the line. Yet even though the speaker withholds the complexity of antebellum Kentucky from the child, Piatt is handing on that complexity to the reader – the myth of the Old South, and its rewriting of slavery, are clearly up for scrutiny. So while this earlier poem is more pessimistic about the next generation's capacity to learn from the past, it prefigures the attitude of 'A Child's Party', where the speaker is far more open about her own racism, and more hopeful that the future can learn.

V

The Old Slave-Music: Piatt's Language Of Mourning For The South.

'The Old Slave-Music' (1873) is one of the most troubling of Piatt's poems about slavery and the most overtly racist. It appears to combine a misreading (mishearing) of the slave songs with a self-centered appropriation of them. As Paula Bennett points out, the really problematic issue in this poem is, 'the speaker's narcissism: *she* will never hear this music again'.³⁸ Yet the complexity that we saw in Piatt's other poems about race should make us wary of either condemning or redeeming her. To reject this poem because it is racist is to ignore the way in which her writing complicates the position of *either/or* by laying bare the complexity and contradiction of its own racism.

Frederick Douglass writes in his narrative (1845):

I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience. I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness. Crying for joy and singing for joy were alike uncommon to me while in the jaws of slavery.³⁹

³⁸ Bennett, *The Palace-Burner*, p.168, n.31.

³⁹ Douglass, p.58.

Piatt's speaker seems to misperceive the slave songs in precisely the way that Douglass describes. In the third stanza she tells us that the slaves songs are, 'savage and fierce and *glad*' [my italics] and in the fifth stanza asks rhetorically.

Were they slaves? They were not then;
 The music had made them free.
 They were happy women and men –
 20 What more do we care to be?

To say that the slaves were 'happy women and men' is problematic, but they are happy only because, 'the music had made them free'. In other words, they are not happy in slavery, but their sorrows are relieved by their singing, if only for a short time. The music gives them a glimpse of freedom and temporarily makes the unbearable condition of slavery slightly more bearable. But although the speaker acknowledges that the songs are a product of the slaves' pain, she still mishears them. She tells us,

It was not the sob of the vain
 In the old, old dark so sweet,
 (I shall never hear it again,)
 Nor the coming of fairy feet.

It was music and music alone,
 10 Not a sigh from a lover's mouth;
 Now it comes in a phantom moan
 From the dead and buried South.

It was savage and fierce and glad,
 It played with the heart at will;
 15 Oh, What a wizard touch it had -
 Oh, if I could hear it still!

In the second and third stanzas she is at pains to emphasise what the music is not, and the effect of this is in fact one of comparison. The poem creates an association between the music and the things that it is being compared with (all sounds), while at the same time the implication is that because it is *not* any of these things, the music exceeds and surpasses them. Thus it is associated with ‘the sob of the vain’ – in the sense of being in vain – in other words a sob that stems from grief and hopelessness: but it is also *not* (in) vain, implying that it is an expression of grief that transcends hopelessness. Similarly, the reference to ‘the coming of fairy feet’ (line 8) associates the music with the mythic and the magical, while at the same time indicating that while it may sound unearthly, it is real music nonetheless. Nor is it a sigh from a lover’s mouth. Here the comparison is with the yearning of a lover and, the implication is that the music’s intensity exceeds that of romantic love – the sighs of the lover and his desire are insubstantial compared to the force of the slave songs.

The speaker then goes on to say that the music was: ‘savage and fierce and glad’ (line 13). This suggests that it was powerful and unrestrained. ‘Glad’ here is not peaceful contentment but seems to refer to the sense of release associated with the expression of fierce, even violent emotion. Significantly, the speaker tells us that the music ‘played with the heart at will’ (line 14) and had a ‘wizard touch’ (line 15). The emphasis here is on the music as unmediated emotion – it has a direct effect on the heart of the listener, ‘playing’ with it and touching it. This is remarkably similar to Douglass’s own account of his response to hearing the slave songs:

The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit and filled me with an ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. The mere recurrence to those songs, even now, afflicts me: and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek... if anyone wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, and, on allowance day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul. - and if he is not thus impressed, it will only be because "there is no flesh in his obdurate heart."⁴⁰

Douglass's description exemplifies sentimental discourse: the heart, seat of the emotions, feels and responds to another's pain. The effectiveness of this transmission of emotion - the outward sign that the emotional and moral message has got through - is usually made visible by the physical response (often the tears) of the listener or reader.⁴¹ As Jeffrey Steele points out, Douglass's rhetorical efficacy is.

...predicated on [his] conviction that his readers share his feeling heart... In Douglass's sentimental lexicon, a hard or stony heart cuts off its possessor from human sympathy, dehumanizing him or her...

...Douglass assumes that his readers' capacity to identify with and feel the pain of those in bondage will motivate their moral resistance to slavery. Just as his memory of the mournful slave songs continued to "deepen" his "hatred of slavery" and "quicken" his "sympathies for [his] brethren in bonds," his readers would follow a similar emotional trajectory.⁴²

In accordance with sentimental rhetoric, the tear that Douglass sheds at the memory of the slave songs, the outward sign of his feeling, draws his readers into a similar emotional response and thus towards a moral condemnation of slavery. Although Piatt's speaker does not outline her own emotional reaction to the songs in terms of

⁴⁰ Douglass, p.58.

⁴¹ For a detailed discussion of the physicality of sentimental discourse and its relation to race and gender, see Karen Sanchez Eppler's essay, 'Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolitionism', in Shirley Samuels, ed., *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp.92-114.

⁴² Jeffrey Steele, 'Douglass and Sentimental Rhetoric' in *Approaches to Teaching 'Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass'*, James C. Hall, ed. (New York: MLA 1999), pp.66-72. (p.67).

sentimental rhetoric (though this is a sentimental poem), the emphasis is still on the songs' power to touch the heart of the listener. Crucially, in both Douglass's and Piatt's descriptions, the slave songs are represented as a spontaneous, transparent form of representation – the free expression of a welling-up of intense feeling which then finds its way, unmediated, into the heart of the listener.

The question of the transparency of representation (as opposed to opacity, contradiction, difficulty) in relation to the slave music is complex. The challenge for Frederick Douglass was to write in such a way as to play with the hearts of his genteel, white readers, moving them to an abhorrence of slavery, while at the same time taking care not to offend their sensibilities. In order to have the desired effect (political support for abolitionism), Douglass was under pressure to produce an eloquent rendering of blacks' suffering which made it palatable for his white audience. Thus it was vital that his description of the songs and his response to them – which then cued his audience on how to respond to black suffering – appeared to be self-evident and natural, a transparent representation of emotion and emotional response which enabled the reader or listener to 'feel right' (as Jane Tompkins puts it in relation to Stowe's sentimental rhetoric). In fact, just as Douglass's description of the slave songs is a carefully calculated and highly skilled rhetorical performance, so the songs themselves turn out to be more complex and less transparent than they appear. In fact, earlier in his description of the slaves' singing, Douglass describes how,

The slaves selected to go to the Great House Farm...were peculiarly enthusiastic. While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for

miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune... They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone. Into all of their songs they would manage to weave something of the Great House Farm. Especially would they do this, when leaving home. They would then sing most exultingly the following words:-

“I am going away to the Great House Farm!
O, yea! O, yea! O!”

This they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do.

I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe that was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension.⁴³

Again, Douglass tells us that to hear these songs is to understand the horror of slavery, yet this is contradicted a number of times in the passage. He claims that he himself did not understand the songs when he was within the circle, which seems implausible. Eric Sundquist suggests that for Douglass to identify too closely with slave culture threatens to leave him stranded in, ‘the demeaning role of platform slave specimen defined for him by Garrisonian abolitionism’ and that ‘this claim, as it is first made in the *Narrative*, is a rhetorical gesture intended to draw readers into a sympathetic understanding of the double meaning of slave music’.⁴⁴ Certainly, after claiming that he did not understand them, Douglass then goes on to say that ‘the hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit and filled me with ineffable

⁴³ Douglass, p.57

⁴⁴ Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp.91-92.

sadness'.⁴⁵ He is careful to present himself as the hearer of these songs, rather than as a singer. It is likely that as Sundquist suggests, Douglass needed to be seen to distance himself from slave culture in order to maintain his credibility amongst whites. His careful description of hearing the songs and weeping in response to them also has the effect of taming their unsettling 'wildness', leading the reader away from it and towards a sympathetic response, via his own 'expression of feeling'.

Douglass also says that the songs would seem 'unmeaning jargon' to many, which contradicts his claim that they are immediately accessible to outsiders as transparent representations of the horror and sadness of slavery. While the sadness of the songs may well have been immediately apparent to white listeners, to say that the singing would be unintelligible to outsiders, while 'full of meaning' to the slaves, suggests that the songs were complex structures with multiple layers of meaning. Henry Louis Gates Jr., in his theorization of African-American rhetorical strategies, argues that from the nineteenth century onwards, blacks have used a signifyin(g) discourse which subverts the dominant meanings of language through linguistic freeplay. The representative of this linguistic strategy, the African-American "trope of tropes" as Gates calls it, is the Signifying Monkey:

Of the many colorful figures that appear in black vernacular tales, perhaps only Tar Baby is as enigmatic and compelling as is that oxymoron, the Signifying Monkey. The ironic reversal of a received racist image of the black as simianlike, the Signifying Monkey, he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language, is our trope for repetition and revision, indeed our trope of chiasmus, repeating and reversing simultaneously as he does in one deft discursive act.

⁴⁵ Douglass, p.58

...the Signifying Monkey exists, or is figured, in a densely structured discursive universe, one absolutely dependent on the play of differences. The poetry in which the monkey's antics unfold is a signifying system: in marked contrast to the supposed transparency of normal speech, the poetry of these tales turns upon the free play of language itself, upon the displacement of meanings, precisely because it draws attention to its rhetorical structures and strategies and thereby draws attention to the force of the signifier.⁴⁶

The slave songs, 'unmeaning' to outsiders yet full of meaning to blacks, exemplify this densely structured discourse. Gates goes on to discuss Douglass's description of the slave songs:

Meaning, Douglass writes, was as determined by sound as by sense, whereby phonetic substitutions determined the shape of the songs. Moreover, the neologisms that Douglass's friends created, "unmeaning jargon" to standard English speakers, were, "full of meaning" to the blacks, who were literally defining themselves in language, just as did Douglass and hundreds of other slave narrators. This, of course, is an example of both sorts of signification, black vernacular and standard English. Douglass continues his discussion by maintaining that his fellow slaves "would sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone," a set of oppositions which led to the song's misreading by non-slaves...this great mistake of interpretation occurred because the blacks were using antiphonal structures to reverse their apparent meaning, as a mode of encoding for self-preservation... those [black people] Douglass knew Signified protectively, leading to the misreading against which Douglass rails.⁴⁷

The slave's singing was clearly charged with meaning, but these layers of meaning were not readily available to outsiders. It is worth noting that Mary Chestnut also wrote an account of hearing blacks singing. Although these songs were hymns and the setting was a church rather than in the woods, the music follows a similar pattern to that described by Douglass. Chestnut describes the transformation brought about in one of the slaves, Jim Nelson, as he sings:

⁴⁶ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp.52-53.

⁴⁷ Gates, p.67.

Though on his knees, facing us, with his eyes shut, he clapped his hands at the end of every sentence, and his voice rose to the pitch of a shrill shriek, Still, his voice was strangely clear and musical, occasionally in a plaintive minor key that went to your heart. Sometimes it rung out like a trumpet. I wept bitterly. It was all sound, however, and emotional pathos. There was literally nothing in what he said. The words had no meaning at all. It was the devotional passion of voice and manner that was so magnetic... It was a little too exciting for me. I would very much have liked to shout, too....

Now, all this leaves not a trace behind. Jim Nelson is a good man – honest and true. And so he continues. Those who stole before steal on, in spite of sobs and shouts on Sunday. Those who drink continue to drink when they can get it....

...[A]s I sat wondering what next, they broke into one of those soul-stirring negro camp-meeting hymns. To me this is the saddest of all earthly music – weird and depressing beyond my powers to describe.⁴⁸

Clearly, Jim Nelson's singing affected Chestnut, it 'went to your heart' she tells us, and describes the camp-meeting hymn as, 'the saddest of all earthly music'. Yet despite this she is dismissive of it as, 'all sound... and emotional pathos'. The words appear to have no meaning and so, for her, there is no real content to the songs, they are just 'sobs and shouts on Sundays'. The fact that they leave 'not a trace' on the singers also implies that for Chestnut the songs are just noise. To her, the slaves still appear to be like children, measured in terms of their loyalty and good behaviour; the virtuous ones are 'honest and true', the bad ones steal and drink. The slaves' music, then, is for Chestnut all sound and pathos, lacking in intelligible meaning; a reflection of the simple and childlike nature of the blacks. But even though she is not moved to ask why the singing contains such sadness, its effect on her is compelling, threatening to overwhelm her, 'I wept bitterly.... I would very much have liked to shout, too...' Her comment that the music leaves no trace on the singers could also be applied to

⁴⁸ Chestnut, p.214.

Chestnut herself, in that, although the music draws her in, making her weep and want to shout, it does not alter her attitude towards the slaves.

The fact that the music leaves no trace behind is not merely a reflection of blindness on Chestnut's part. It also indicates that the blacks are Signifyin(g) protectively, as Gates puts it. Douglass's text is marked by a necessary paradox – the slaves' singing is both unmeaning jargon and fully comprehensible to outsiders – which gives whites the illusion of having access to the meaning of blacks' songs. Similarly, Chestnut's account of hearing the songs is riven with contradiction. She assesses blacks in terms of how they behave towards whites – whether they are good or bad – and so she does not acknowledge the possibility that they might have their own systems of representation, 'full of meaning to themselves' as Douglass says. Thus it does not occur to her that the intensity and violence of Jim Nelson's singing, apparently so out of character, might be what allows him to be 'honest and true' (i.e. meek and obedient) for the rest of the week. Nor does she seem to realise that stealing and drinking are, in their different ways, strategies for survival rather than vice and that the proportion of those drinking might be far higher if blacks' despair was not given this cathartic outlet. The forcefulness of the Sunday singing thus appears as an apparent contradiction of the slaves' conduct for the rest of the time - it is a strange, recurring phenomenon, which leaves no mark behind. As we saw earlier, Chestnut expressed a desire to see behind the 'masks' of her black servants so as to gauge their loyalty, and it seems that the masks have been temporarily raised here, at least to the extent of revealing the depth of their feeling. Yet Chestnut does not see this, and so for

her it is not a moment of revelation or of conversion. Despite the songs' disturbing power, they do not reveal the slaves as suffering fellow human beings to her. they merely ensure that the singers, 'Signifyin(g) protectively', remain an enigma.

Although Chestnut dwells on the sadness of the singing, she does not analyse the reasons for its 'pathos'. She does, however, focus on its 'magnetic' power and 'devotional passion'. Piatt's speaker, by associating the songs with 'the sob of the vain' makes it clear, as Douglass does, that they originate in the sadness and despair of slavery, but her version of the songs is more like Chestnut's, in that she emphasises their magnetic force and intensity. Chestnut perceives this as 'devotional passion', - a form of religious fervour, which, although uninhibited, is licensed by Christian faith and contained by the authority of the church (this seems to be reason that Chestnut wonders why the slaves' singing, apparently a sign of their fervent Christian faith, does not make them more well-behaved). The speaker in Piatt's poem hears the songs as 'savage' (line 13), which is problematic. Read alongside 'fierce and glad', savage, as we noted earlier, serves to emphasise the unrestrained force of the songs. But, by saying that the slaves' singing allows them to transcend their oppression, the speaker also puts them outside of society and associates them with that which is untamed and uncivilised - the pre-social 'other'.⁴⁹

Yet she is not saying that the slaves are merely savages, their songs a reflection of their child-like simplicity. At stake, ultimately, is what the songs represent in terms

⁴⁹ It is this very 'wildness' that Douglass has to downplay in order to gain credibility amongst white audiences that, however sympathetic to abolition, were also quick to see blacks as savages.

of lyric expression. For the speaker, the singing is a form of transparent utterance that transcends the constraints of society; it is pure song, 'music and music alone'. Yet now she is cut off from this music, it exists only as a, 'phantom moan/From the dead and buried South' (lines 11-12). And it is the 'blood, blackness and dust', 'terrible things to see' and 'stories of swords that rust' (lines 21-23), in other words, the war, which now comes between her and the music. At this point it would be easy to read the speaker as merely narcissistic. In the final stanza it becomes apparent that she is addressing an interlocutor, who presumably is pointing out that the war, for all its horror, did put an end to slavery:

Hush, hush – I know it, I say;
 30 Your armies were bright and brave,
 But the music they took away
 Was worth – whatever they gave. (Stanza 8)

She seems to be saying that despite the fact that the armies took away the music by giving the slaves their freedom, she would prefer slavery to remain so that she could still hear the slave music. The freedom of blacks is not, in other words, worth the price of the suffering caused by the war. Yet the speaker has already acknowledged that the slaves sang because they were experiencing unbearable suffering which makes it unlikely that she is taking such a callous stance.

In fact, the difficulty in reading this poem is that her perception of the slave music is essentially contradictory. On the one hand, she seems to be locating the slaves in a pre-fallen, pastoral world in which they have access to spontaneous lyric utterance. The poem begins with an injunction to,

- 1 Blow back the breath of the bird,
Scatter the song through the air;
There was music you never heard,
And cannot hear anywhere.

The implication is that the bird's breath – its singing – is inferior to the slave music. Yet this negation also contains an implicit comparison (as in the second and third stanzas). If birdsong represents 'pure song, in other words, entirely unmediated expression, then the implication is that slave music exceeds this; it is language that effaces itself as language and becomes pure emotion. The music, which is now only a phantom moan, comes from the dead and buried South. What separates the speaker from the Old South and the music is the war, which is represented in terms of blood, blackness and dust, and rusting swords. The war, then, is being viewed not in terms of liberation, but as a catastrophic event, a loss of innocence. The implication is that the pre-war South was innocent and that the slaves inhabited a pre-fallen world. In this world they were able to make music that was pure and spontaneous, a song that, freed from the usual constraints of language, communicated itself directly to the heart of the listener. It seems to be a condition of the postwar world that this form of utterance is no longer available. To go back to the first stanza for a moment, what precedes the demand that the birdsong be scattered through the air is the somewhat awkward image of the breath of the bird being returned to it – literally blown back into itself (line 1). In other words, it is the *production* of the song, the possibility of making such an utterance, which is now impossible. It is, then, as we noted earlier, the question of what the music *represents* for the speaker in terms of transparent, lyric utterance that

is crucial, however false this conception of it may be. It is not (or not only) that the speaker is saying that the slaves are freed now and no longer sing, therefore the music has been taken away from her, but rather that the loss of innocence brought about by the war means that this form of transparent, lyric expression can no longer be produced.

On the other hand, the speaker's description of the music also suggests that it is not as straightforwardly transparent as it might seem. She tells us that the music, 'played with the heart at will' (line 14), in other words, such was its emotional force that it went straight to the listener's heart. Yet to play with also implies to have at one's disposal, to manipulate, which suggests that the music is not merely an unreflective outburst of emotion. To play with the listener's heart – as though the heart is itself an instrument – implies that the music is skillfully deployed, deliberate in its effects. The speaker also describes it as having a 'wizard' touch. Wizard can of course mean sorcery, suggesting that the music has an unearthly quality, but it also means great cleverness and skill. Effectively, the music is a medium through which the slaves express their collective 'will' and skillfulness. Yet these are displaced from the slaves onto the music itself in stanza four, and as a result we lose sight of the slaves as singers, generating the music that frees them, however fleetingly. In fact, while their music may be skilful and calculated in its effects, the slaves sing first and foremost for themselves, regardless of the effects of their singing on the white listener, and because their music is a consciously deployed medium of expression, there is no guarantee that it allows the listener to glimpse the hearts of the singers. Yet the speaker seems, in any

case, not to be that interested in the singers themselves, preferring to focus instead on the way in which the music affects her. Thus the slaves' freedom, or at least their emotions (after all we only have the speaker's word for it that the music makes them free) are presented as merely incidental to the fact of the music itself.

The poem could, then, be read as being merely a mishearing and misappropriation of black song, yet it proves to be more complicated than this precisely because the music turns out to be not what the speaker thought it was. She attributes the loss of the music, and the loss of the South, to the war and associates the 'phantom moan' - all that is now left of the music - with the dead and buried South. It seems that, for her, the slaves' music is what represents the Old South (which is somewhat ironic, given that the music is sung by those who were most oppressed by Southern society and who, presumably, most wished for plantation culture to be brought to an end). The music is thus, for the speaker, representative of a culture and way of life that ~~are~~ now lost - it becomes in effect an elegy for the prewar South. Yet the speaker has also acknowledged that the slaves are not free: 'the music had made them free' (line 18) reflects not so much whether or not the music did actually free the slaves from their pain, but rather her awareness that the slaves were not *not* slaves, hence their need to sing. Rather than being transparent lyric expression, the music is the slaves' song of mourning for their lost freedom. This means that, far from being an Edenic world, the antebellum South is already fallen; already contains those who mourn - contains within it an encryption of absence, loss, dispossession. It is precisely in the speaker's mishearing of it as transparent that the music reveals its non-

transparency. In other words, the music does not find its way to the speaker without distortion because she hears it as transparent, as pure song, available to her only in an ideal, unfallen world where grief does not exist. As in 'Over in Kentucky', the poem reveals the paradox of its own racism: on the one hand taking the slave songs to be a reflection of the idyllic nature of the old South, while on the other hand acknowledging that the slaves sang because they were suffering and in mourning for their freedom. In fact, it is this very language of mourning, which the speaker mishears as transparent, that the postwar world seems to demand. The speaker is now the one who is cut off from her homeland, alienated and dispossessed. Undeniably. Piatt is appropriating black suffering but, unlike her contemporaries she is also articulating her awareness of the fact that she is now the slave of slavery. In other words, that *structurally*, as a white Southerner, she occupies the position of slave because *she* is now the one who mourns. Therefore, even if we cannot escape the conclusion that Piatt's speaker is saying that her pain is as bad as that of the slaves, if we want to read the poem responsibly *we have to accept that structural similitude between her and 'the slaves'*.

Like the slave music, Piatt's poetic language is not transparent but opaque and enigmatic, subject to paradox and complexity. In 'The Old Slave Music', the speaker desires transparency of language, but the poem is suggesting this is simply not available, at least not in relation to the South. Instead of transparent representations of the idyllic Old South, this poem, like Piatt's other poems about race and the South, offers complexity and difficulty, a poetics which speaks, ultimately, from within the

unmasterable predicament of mourning. More specifically, Piatt is also writing about the problem of mourning from the point of view of someone estranged from, but still deeply invested in, the defeated South. The final stanza of poem seems to be addressed not only to a specific interlocutor but also more generally to the Republican readers of the Capitol: ‘...I know it, I say;/ Your armies were bright and brave,/ But the music they took away/ Was worth whatever they gave’ (lines 29-32). This seems to be an acknowledgement of the inevitability of Northern victory, but also it is the Northern armies who brought with them ‘blood and blackness and dust’ and the destruction of the South. By referring to them as, ‘Your armies’, the speaker indicates her sense of alienation from the North. Similarly, the music that has been taken away from her seems to refer not only to the fact that slave music is no longer accessible but also to the fact that, as a Southerner, she is now dispossessed, alienated, lacking a language. Nonetheless, Piatt is able to construct in her own poetic voice, a language of mourning for the South. This enables her to explore and expose her own deeply felt emotional ties to antebellum plantation society, while at the same time undoing and exposing its fictions of mastery.

Conclusion: Entertaining the Dead

Horatio: O day and night, but this is wondrous strange.

Hamlet: And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.

Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 5, 172-173.

“So, I, the only living one,” I said,

“At dead of night have entertained the dead.”

‘A Party in a Dream.’ (1883).

Piatt, as I suggested in the Introduction, is a poet who is concerned with the question of how to respond to the dead. In her poem ‘A Party in a Dream’ which forms part of the epigraph to my conclusion, the speaker describes herself as entertaining the dead. The idea of entertaining - in the sense of being hospitable to, welcoming, opening oneself up to – the strangeness of the other, is particularly apt for thinking about how Piatt deals with mourning and haunting in her poetry. The epigraph from *Hamlet* is taken from Act One, just after the Ghost has appeared to Hamlet for the first time. It implies that, by the very logic of hospitality, the familiar, the known, is already in residence, and therefore one can only be said to be truly hospitable to that which is strange and other: ‘*therefore* as a stranger give it welcome’ (welcome it insofar as it is a stranger). It is also worth noting that this quotation comes just before a more famous phrase, ‘There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,/ Than are dreamt of in your philosophy’ (lines 174-175), which emphasises the very *strangeness* of the ghost - the fact that it eludes philosophy and theology. Its very strangeness, in other words, should be welcomed: ‘*therefore as* a stranger, give it welcome’. Strangeness and hauntedness are the very things that are welcomed and entertained by Piatt’s writing.

As we have seen in this thesis, rather than simply attempting to lay it to rest or to domesticate its disturbing otherness, she chooses instead to engage in dialogue with it. By doing so, she is able to explore the ways in which the past and the dead continue to exert a hold over the living.

Whereas Phelps and Stowe turn to a narrative of redemptive Christianity and Whitman evokes images of an idealised, pastoral America in order to efface the violence of the war and heal the nation, Piatt explores how these myths, rather than transcending ideology, are closely bound up with it. Similarly, where public memorialisation seems to offer the ‘truth’ of the war, and to console the living while honouring the dead, she exposes the ways in which it is also a ‘forgetting’ of the war’s complexity. Equally, although she is deeply invested in the South, she is sceptical of the idea of the Confederate Lost Cause. As we saw in ‘Another War’, the speaker’s awareness that the ‘bloom’ of the pre-war South was illusory – that death and mourning have always been present – undercuts the ‘end’ to mourning represented by the fantasised return of the Old South. This scepticism about the idea of an Edenic antebellum South is visible in her poems about race as well as in those that deal with the war. Piatt is aware of the force of slavery as a *system*, not only in terms of physical abuse and brutality, but also in terms of the way in which it continues to exert a psychological hold over both blacks and the whites who had previously owned them. Thus, while her writing about the prewar South is elegaic, in the sense that she seeks for it a language of mourning, she does not simply attempt to memorialise it as do Confederate writers such as Virginia French and Thomas Nelson Page. Instead, she

examines how possession – mastery – becomes a form of demonic possession whereby the former masters of the South remain enslaved to the past.

Piatt's poetry frequently leaves the reader deprived of a sense of closure and ending. Her poetic sensibility is, to use Bennett's term, 'protomodernist'.¹ This term refers to the way in which, on the one hand, her poetry prefigures the work of later modernist writers through her privileging of doubt, uncertainty and irony, and through her willingness to analyse the limits and contradictions of the master narratives of Christian resurrection, domestic sentimentality, the Southern Cause, and progress and manifest destiny. On the other hand, however, Piatt is not attempting to rebuild a new poetics from the fragments of these myths. Instead she speaks from a position that is somewhere in between: she is no longer comfortably inside them but she is not quite situated outside, either. Likewise, her poetic language is disorientating and experimental in its use of dialogue, in its fragmentation of temporality and subjectivity, and in her use of rough, uneven metre; but her diction remains rooted in the genteel tradition of the nineteenth century, making her appear at first glance – but only at first glance – to be a conventional, sentimental woman poet.

The 'I' in Piatt's writing is always being confronted with the experience of non-mastery, and by extension, so is Piatt's reader. In reading her work, we are denied univocality and transparency and forced to take account of this experience of non-

¹ See Paula Bernat Bennett, 'Not Just Filler and Not Just Sentimental: Women's Poetry in American Victorian Periodicals, 1860-1900', in *Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America*, edited by Kenneth M. Price and Susan Belasco Smith, (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1995), pp.202-219, (p.207).

mastery. It has been my aim in this thesis to suggest ways of reading Piatt's poetry that allow its difficulties and contradictions to speak; to welcome its strangeness rather than attempt to reduce or domesticate it. Much work has already been done to recover the work of nineteenth-century women poets and I hope that this thesis has demonstrated Piatt's significance to the canon of American poetry. Since I began work on this thesis, her verse has been included in two new poetry anthologies, which suggests that its import is beginning to be recognised by scholars.² It is the very strangeness of her work, its unconventionality and singularity, which provides all the more reason to give it welcome.

² *The New Anthology of American Poetry*, vol.1, edited by Steven Gould Axelrod, Camille Roman et al, (Rutgers University Press, forthcoming).
The Norton Anthology of American Poetry, sixth edition, vol.2, edited by Nina Baym et al, (Norton Publishers, 2002).

Appendix I

Army of Occupation.....	232
Shapes of a Soul.....	234
Shoulder-Rank.....	235
One From the Dead.....	236
Another War.....	238
Over in Kentucky.....	240
The Black Princess.....	242
The Old Slave-Music.....	244
We Two.....	245
A Child's Party.....	246
A Party in a Dream.....	250

ARMY OF OCCUPATION¹

At Arlington, 1866²

The summer blew its little drifts of sound—
 Tangled with wet leaf-shadows and the light
 Small breath of scattered morning buds—around
 The yellow path through which our footsteps wound.
 Below, the Capitol rose glittering white.

5

There stretched a sleeping army. One by one.
 They took their places until thousands met;
 No leader's stars flashed on before, and none
 Leaned on his sword or stagg[e]r'd with his gun—
 I wonder if their feet have rested yet!

10

They saw the dust, they joined the moving mass.
 They answer'd the fierce music's cry for blood,
 Then straggled here and lay down in the grass:—
 Wear flowers for such, shores whence their feet did pass;
 Sing tenderly; O river's haunted flood!

15

They had been sick, and worn, and weary, when
 They stopp'd on this calm hill beneath the trees:
 Yet if, in some red-clouded dawn, again
 The country should be calling to her men,
 Shall the r[e]veill[e] not remember these?

20

Around them, underneath the mid-day skies
 The dreadful phantoms of the living walk.
 And by low moons and darkness with their cries—
 The mothers, sisters, wives with faded eyes.
 Who call still names amid their broken talk.

25

¹ Variant: title: 'Arlington Heights', subtitle: 'At Arlington, Va, 1866', (*Harper's Weekly*).

² Arlington National Cemetery was established in 1864 on the site of General Robert E. Lee's former estate, across the Potomac River from Washington D.C. In September 1866 the grave was sealed. It held the remains of over two thousand unknown Union soldiers.

And there is one³ who comes alone and stands
At his dim fireless hearth—chill'd and oppress'd
By Something he has summon'd to his lands,
While the weird pallor of its many hands
Points to his rusted sword in his own breast!

30

Harper's Weekly (1866)
Reprinted *Mac-a-Cheek Press*, 1867
Text from *Mac-a-Cheek Press*, 1867

³ General Robert E. Lee.

Shapes Of A Soul

White with the starlight folded in its wings,
 And nestling timidly against your love.
 For⁴ this soft time of hushed and glimmering things.
 You call my soul a dove, a snowy dove.

If I shall ask you in some shining hour, 5
 When bees and odors through the clear air pass,
 You'll say my soul buds as a small flush'd flower.
 Far off, half hiding, in the old home grass.

Ah, pretty names for pretty moods; and you,
 Who love me, such sweet shapes as these can see: 10
 But, take it from its sphere of bloom and dew.
 And where will then your bird or blossom be?

Could you but see it, by life's torrid light,
 Crouch in its sands and glare with fire-red wrath.
 My soul would seem a tiger, fierce and bright 15
 Among the trembling passions in its path.

And, could you sometimes watch it coil and slide.
 And drag its colors through the dust a while,
 And hiss its poison under foot, and hide,
 My soul would seem a snake – ah, do not smile! 20

Yet fiercer forms and viler⁵ it can wear;
 No matter, though, when these are of the Past,
 If as a lamb in the Good Shepherd's care
 By the still waters it lie down at last.

Text from *Galaxy*, 1867

Reprinted, *Mrs. Piatt's Poems: A Voyage to the Fortunate Isles, And Other Poems*, 1886.

⁴Variant: 'For' appears as 'at' see, *Mrs. Piatt's Poems: A Voyage To The Fortunate Isles And Other Poems*, by Sarah M. B. Piatt, (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1886).

⁵Variant: 'viler' appears as 'darker', (*Mrs. Piatt's Poems: A Voyage To The Fortunate Isles*).

SHOULDER-RANK

“West Point?” Yes, that was the one grand argument ever so long
 At the capital, I remember now, in our far-back battledays:
 If the hour’s great Leader blundered and war, therefore, went wrong.
 West point would give a subtle faith in that great Leader’s ways.

West Point—Ah, well, no doubt they can graduate generals there. 5
 Why, I wonder they do not send them out, plumed, sworded, and ready-
 scarr’d

And just because one when a boy has happened somehow to wear
 The uniform of their cadets, let his shoulders be splendidly starr’d!

And if he in such starlight should grope on a little ahead
 Of the failures of two or three others and fall in some shining high place 10
 Does that go to prove that not one in the dusty dim legions he led
 Could give him his orders in secret and point him the way to your grace?

Oh, you fancy you honor where honor is due? But I feel
 You may shake the hand that finished your work, nor guess at the head that
 planned;

What if I tell you that one, who studied the science of steel, 15
 In the nameless name of a Private commanded his chief to command!

If I say that he passed, through a wound in his breast, up the hill,
 And lies buried where grave-marks by thousands at Arlington whiten the
 air—

Why—you will go on and believe that our very first warrior still
 Sits smoking his pipe of Peace in the Presidential easy chair! 20

Text from *The Capital*, 1871
 Not subsequently reprinted.

ONE FROM THE DEAD

“Yes, yes! It is nine years, you say?
There is his portrait. He was handsome. Yes!”
His mother’s mother kept her eyes away,
But pointed up, and I could guess.

He was remembered in his room: 5
Of him pet window-flowers, in odors, dreamed;
His shut piano, under their sad bloom,
The coffin of dead music seemed.

His vain-plumed hat was there; there, too,
The sword, whose bitter cause was never gained; 10
The coat, with glimmering shoulder-leaves, shot-through
The breast, I think, and fiercely stained.

Yet, till I saw his name—the one
His youth had soiled—above the creeping dew
Thrust high, to whiten in the grave-yard sun: 15
I vaguely felt, I darkly knew.

Oh, coward-praise, men give to dust,
Only when it lies motionless and mute
Beneath the shining slander, which it must
Not, till the Judgement-light, refute! 20

What more? If one, with voice and breath,
Had given to one a rose-geranium bud,
And changed with moons and vanished into death
In far back feuds of hate and blood;

If that one, from great after-grief— 25
In some long, empty, lonesome cry—had said,
‘I would believe, help Thou mine unbelief
With One that was—One from the dead;’

And felt a sudden, luminous Face—
Sweet terror, yet divinest quiet, there; 30
And reached—to find Thorns were in the place

Of lovely, worldly-fancied hair;

That Hands, not such as gave old flowers,
But torn with Nails, had blessed a piteous head:
That Doubt's slow question, from the unlighted hours. 35
Was answered by One from the Dead;

If this had been—You smile, and say to me.
“It were Illusion, shaped of wandering sleep!”
Well, if it were illusion, let it be:
I have a tender faith to keep. 40

Text from *Overland Monthly*, 1871
Not subsequently reprinted.

ANOTHER WAR

Yes, they are coming from the fort—
 Not weary they, nor dimm'd with dust;
 Their march seems but a shining sport,
 Their swords too new for rust.

You think the captains look so fine, 5
 You like, I know, the long sharp flash.
 The fair silk flags above the line,
 The pretty scarlet sash?

You like the horses when they neigh,
 You like the music most of all, 10
 And, if they had to fight to-day,
 You'd like to see them fall.

I wisely think the uniform
 Was made for skeletons to wear,
 But your young blood is quick and warm. 15
 And so—you do not care.

You lift your eager eyes and ask:
 "Could we not have another war?"
 As I might give this fearful task
 To armies near and far. 20

Another war? Perhaps we could,
 Yet, child of mine with sunniest head,
 I sometimes wonder if I would
 Bear then to see the dead!

But am I in a dream? For see, 25
 My pretty boy follows the men—
 Surely he did not speak to me,
 Who could have spoken, then?

It was another child, less fair,
 Less young, less innocent, I know. 30
 Who lost the light gold from its hair

Most bitter years ago!

It was that restless, wavering child
 I call Myself. No other, dear.
 Perhaps you knew it when you smiled
 Because none else was near.

35

Then not my boy, it seems, but I
 Would wage another war?—to see
 The shining sights, to hear the cry
 Of ghastly victory?

40

No—for another war could bring
 No second bloom to wither'd flowers,
 No second song to birds that sing,
 Lost tunes in other hours!

But, friend, since time is full of pain,
 Whether men fall by field or hearth,
 I want the old war back again,
 And nothing new on earth!

45

Text from *The Capital*, 1872
 Not subsequently reprinted.

OVER IN KENTUCKY

“This is the smokiest city in the world,”
 A slight voice, wise and weary, said, “I know.
 My sash is tied, and if my hair was curled,
 I’d like to have my prettiest hat and go
 There where some violets had to stay, you said.
 Before your torn-up butterflies were dead—
 Over in Kentucky”.

Then one, whose half-sad face still wore the hue
 The North Star loved to light and linger on,
 Before the war, looked slowly at me too, 10
 And darkly whispered: “What is gone is gone.
 Yet, though it may be better to be free,
 I’d rather have things as they used to be
 Over in Kentucky.”

Perhaps I thought how fierce the master’s hold, 15
 Spite of all armies, kept the slave within:
 How iron⁶ chains, when broken, turned to gold,
 In empty cabins, where glad songs had been.
 Before the Southern sword knew blood and rust,
 Before wild cavalry sprang from the dust, 20
 Over in Kentucky.

Perhaps—but, since two eyes, half-full of tears,
 Half-full of sleep, would love to keep awake
 With fairy pictures from my fairy years, 25
 I have a phantom pencil that can make
 Shadows of moons, far back and faint, to rise
 On dewier grass and in diviner skies.
 Over in Kentucky.

For yonder river, wider than the sea,
 Seems sometimes in the dusk a visible moan⁷ 30

⁶ Variant: ‘iron’ appears as ‘leaden’. (*Capital, Independent*).

⁷ Variant: ‘moan’ appears as ‘moon’ (*Independent*).

Between two worlds—one fair, one dear to me.
 The fair has forms⁸ of ever-glimmering stone.
 Weird-whispering ruin. Graves where legends hide.
 And lies in mist upon the charmèd side.
 Over in Kentucky.

35

The dear has restless, dimpled, pretty⁹ hands.
 Yearning toward unshaped steel, unfancied wars.
 Unbuilt cities, and unbroken lands,
 With something sweeter than the faded stars
 And dim, dead dewes of my lost romance, found
 In beauty that has vanished from the ground.
 Over in Kentucky.

40

The Independent, 1872
 Reprinted, *Capital*, 1872
 Reprinted, *Voyage to the Fortunate Isles, etc.*, 1874
 Text from, *Voyage to the Fortunate Isles*.

⁸ Variant: 'forms' appears as 'shapes' (*Capital*, 1872)

⁹ Variant: 'pretty' appears as 'snowy', (*Capital, Independent*).

THE BLACK PRINCESS

(A True Fable of My Old Kentucky Nurse)

I knew a Princess: she was old,
Crisp-haired, flat-featured, with a look
Such as no dainty pen of gold
Would write of in a fairy book.

So bent she almost crouched, her face 5
Was like the Sphinx's face to me,
Touched with vast patience, desert grace,
And lonesome, brooding mystery.

What wonder that a faith so strong
As hers, so sorrowful, so still, 10
Should watch in bitter sands so long,
Obedient to a burdening will!

This Princess was a slave – like one
I read of in a painted tale;
Yet free enough to see the sun, 15
And all the flowers without a veil.

Not of the lamp, not of the ring,
The helpless, powerful slave was she;
But of a subtler, fiercer thing –
She was the slave of Slavery. 20

Court lace nor jewels had she seen:
She wore a precious smile so rare
That at her side the whitest queen
Were dark – her darkness was so fair.

Nothing of loveliest loveliness 25
This strange sad Princess seemed to lack
Majestic with her calm distress
She was, and beautiful, though black.

Black, but enchanted black, and shut
In some vague giant's tower of air. 30
Built higher than her hope was. But

The true knight came and found her there.

The Knight of the Pale Horse, he laid
His shadowy lance against her spell
That hid her self: as if afraid, 35
The cruel blackness shrank and fell.

Then, lifting slow her pleasant sleep,
He took her with him through the night,
And swam a river cold and deep,
And vanished up an awful hight. 40

And in her father's house beyond,
They gave her beauty, robe, and crown:
On me, I think, far, faint and fond,
Her eyes today look, yearning, down.

Text from *The Independent*. 1872
Reprinted, *Mrs. Piatt's Poems: A Voyage to
the Fortunate Isles And Other Poems*, 1886

THE OLD SLAVE-MUSIC

Blow back the breath of the bird,
Scatter the song through the air;
There was music you never heard,
And cannot hear anywhere.

It was not the sob of the vain
In the old, old dark so sweet,
(I shall never hear it again,)
Nor the coming of fairy feet. 5

It was music and music alone,
Not a sigh from a lover's mouth;
Now it comes in a phantom moan
From the dead and buried South. 10

It was savage and fierce and glad,
It played with the heart at will;
Oh, what a wizard touch it had –
Oh, if I could hear it still! 15

Were they slaves? They were not then;
The music had made them free.
They were happy women and men –
What more do we care to be? 20

There is blood and blackness and dust,
There are terrible things to see,
There are stories of swords that rust,
Between that music and me.

Dark ghosts with your ghostly tunes
Come back till I laugh through tears;
Dance under the sunken moons,
Dance over the grassy years! 25

Hush, hush – I know it, I say:
Your armies were bright and brave,
But the music they took away
Was worth – whatever they gave. 30

Text from *The Capital*, 1873
Not subsequently reprinted

We Two

God's will is – the bud of the rose for your hair,
 The ring for your hand and the pearl for your breast:
 God's will is – the mirror that makes you look fair.
 No wonder you whisper: "God's will is the best."

But what if God's will were the famine, the flood? 5
 And were God's will the coffin shut down in your face?
 And were God's will the worm in the fold of the bud,
 Instead of the picture, the light, and the lace?

Were God's will the arrow that flieth by night,
 Were God's will the pestilence walking by day, 10
 The clod in the valley, the rock on the hight –
 I fancy "God's will" would be harder to say.

God's will is – your own will. What honor have you
 For having your own will, awake or asleep?
 Who praises the lily for keeping the dew, 15
 When the dew is so sweet for the lily to keep?

God's will unto me is not music or wine.
 With helpless reproaching, with desolate tears
 God's will I resist, for God's will is divine;
 And I – shall be dust to the end of my years. 20

God's will is – not mine. Yet one night I shall lie
 Very still at his feet, where the stars may not shine.
 "Lo! I am well pleased" I shall hear from the sky;
 Because it is God's will I do, and not mine.

Text from *The Independent*, 1874.
 Reprinted, *Mrs. Piatt's Poems: A Voyage to
 the Fortunate Isles And Other Poems*, 1886.

A CHILD'S PARTY¹⁰

Before my cheeks were fairly dry,
I heard my dusky playmate say:
"Well, now your mother's in the sky,
And you can always have your way.

"Old Mistress has to stay, you know, 5
And read the Bible in her room.
Let's have a party! Will you, though?"
Ah, well, the whole world was in bloom.

"A party would be fine, and yet –
There's no one here I can invite." 10
"Me and the children." "You forget—" "
"Oh, please pretend that I am white."

I said and think of it with shame,
"Well when it's over, you'll go back
There to the cabin all the same, 15
And just remember you are black.

"I'll be the lady, for, you see,
I'm pretty," I serenely said.
"The black folk say that you would be
If—if your hair just wasn't red." 20

"I'm pretty anyhow, you know.
I saw this morning that I was."
"Old Mistress says its wicked, though,
To keep on looking in the glass."

Our quarrel ended. At our feet 25
A faint green blossoming carpet lay.
By some strange chance, divinely sweet.
Just shaken on that gracious day.

¹⁰ Variant: subtitle added: 'In Kentucky, A.D. 185— (*Child's-World Ballads and Other Poems*, Second Series, Westminster, England: Archibald Constable, 1895).

Into the lonesome parlor we
 Glided, and from the shuddering wall
 Bore, in its antique majesty,
 The gilded mirror dim and tall. 30

And then a woman, painted by –
 By Raphael, for all I care!¹¹
 From her unhappy place on high,
 Went with us to the outside air.¹² 35

Next the quaint candlesticks we took.
 Their waxen tapers every one
 We lighted, to see how they'd look:—
 A strange sight, surely, in the sun. 40

Then with misgiving, we undid
 The secret closet by the stair;--
 There, with patrician dust half-hid,
 My ancestors, in china, were.

(Hush, child, this splendid tale is true!) 45
 Were one of these on earth to-day,
 You'd know right well my blood was blue:
 You'd own I was not common clay.

There too, long hid from eyes of men.
 A shining sight we two did see. 50
 Oh, there was solid silver then
 In this poor hollow world – ah me!

We spread the carpet. By a great
 Gray tree, we leant the mirror's glare.
 And graven spoon and pictured plate
 Were wildly scattered here and there. 55

And then our table:-- Thereon gleamed,
 Adorned with many an apple-bud,
 Foam-frosted, dainty things that seemed
 Made of the most delicious mud. 60

Next came our dressing. As to that,
 I had the fairest shoes! (on each
 Were four gold buttons) and a hat,

¹¹ Variant 'By Ignotus, doubtless, tired and fair'. (*Child's-World Ballads*).

¹² Variant: 'just to take the air!' (*Child's-World Ballads*)

And the plume the blushes of the peach.¹³

But there was my dark, elfish guest
Still standing shabby in her place.
How could I use her to show best
My own transcendent bloom and grace? 65

“You’ll be my grandmama,” I sighed
After much thought, somewhat in fear.
She, joyous, to her sisters cried:
“Call me old Mistress! Do you hear?” 70

About that little slave’s weird face
And rude, round form, I fastened all
My grandmama’s most awful lace
And grandmama’s most sacred shawl. 75

Then one last sorrow came to me:
“I didn’t think of it before,
But at a party there should be
One gentleman, I guess,¹⁴ or more.” 80

“There’s uncle Sam, you might ask him.”
I looked, and in an ancient chair,
Sat a bronze gray-beard, still and grim.
On Sundays called Old Brother Blair.

Above a book his brows were bent.
It was his pride as I had heard,
To study the New Testament
(In which he could not spell one word). 85

“Oh, he is not a gentleman,”
I said with my Caucasian scorn.
“He is,” replied the African;
“He is. He’s quit a-plowing¹⁵ corn. 90

“He was¹⁶ so old they set him free.
He preaches now, you ought to know.
I tell you we are proud when he
Eats dinner at our cabin, though.” 95

¹³ Variant: ‘plume like blushes of the peach’. (*Child’s-World Ballads*)

¹⁴ Variant: ‘think’. (*Child’s-World Ballads*)

¹⁵ Variant: ‘a-ploughin’ (*Child’s-World Ballads*)

¹⁶ Variant: ‘got’ (*Child’s-World Ballads*)

“Well – ask him!” Lo, he raised his head.
 His voice was shaken and severe:
 Here, sisters in the church,” he said.
 “Here – for old Satan’s sake, come here!” 100

“That white child’s done put on her best
 Silk bonnet. (It looks like a rose.)
 And this black little imp is drest
 In all Old Mistress’ finest clothes.

“Come, look! They’ve got the parlor glass, 105
 And all the silver too. Come, look!
 (Such plates as these, here on the grass!)”
 And Uncle Sam shut up his book.

The priestess of the eternal flame
 That warmed our Southern kitchen hearth 110
 Rushed out. The housemaid with her came
 Who swept the cobwebs from the earth.

Then there was one bent to the ground,
 Her hair than lilies not less white,
 With a bright handkerchief was crowned: 115
 Her lovely face was weird as night.

I felt the flush of sudden pride.
 The others soon grew still with awe,
 For, standing bravely at my side,
 My mother’s nurse and mine, they saw. 120

“Who blamed my child?” she said. “It makes
 My heart ache when they trouble you.
 Here’s a whole basket full of cakes,
 And I’ll come to the party too.” ...

Tears made of dew were in my eyes. 125
 These after-tears are made of brine.
 No sweeter soul is in the skies
 Than hers, my mother’s nurse and mine.

Text from *Wide-Awake*, 1883
 Reprinted, *Child’s-World*
Ballads and Other Poems, 1895

A PARTY IN A DREAM¹⁷

Strange, after five-and-twenty years, to keep
A tryst, made, somehow, in the shadow of sleep!

In the sad island-moon, here by the sea,
What still ship landed such a company?

Now, that I think, some of the girls wore white
With flowers.—Ah me, my heart! As well they might! 5

The boys—but, surely, long ago I read
That one in battle drooped his shining head.

And one, they said, had vanished through the sand,
A home-sick alien, in a palmy land. 10

One laughing, whispered: “After such a night
We shall not look well in the morning light:

“The boys would say—but it is time to go;”
And suddenly the cock began to crow.

“So, I, the only living one.” I said, 15
“At dead of night have entertained the dead.”

The Independent, 1883
Text from *In Primrose Time*, 1886

¹⁷ Variant: The *Independent* version incorporates two additional stanzas, ‘They wore the rose out of the world, where I/Walk in the frosty leaves and know not why./Yet, from the blessed islands, it may be They brought some scent, some secret word to me’. See Bennett, *Palace-Burner*, p.175. n.85.

Appendix II

Books by Sarah Piatt

The Nests at Washington and Other Poems, with John James Piatt (New York: Walter Low, 1864; London: Sampson Low, 1864).

A Woman's Poems (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1871, 1878).

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